RALPH OF THE ROUNDHOUSE

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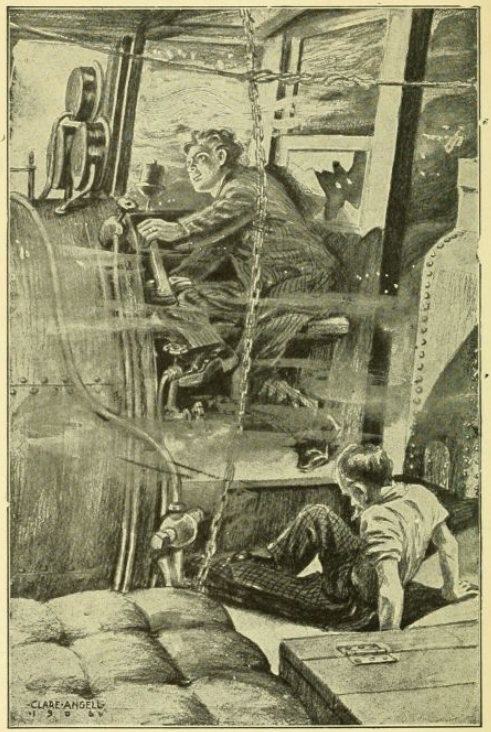
RALPH OF THE ROUNDHOUSE

OR

BOUND TO BECOME A RAILROAD MAN

BY



RALPH STEPPED OVER HIS RECUMBENT COMPANION AND PLACED HIS HAND ON THE LEVER.—P. 42.

Ralph of the Roundhouse.

RALPH STEPPED OVER HIS RECUMBENT COMPANION AND PLACED HIS HAND ON THE LEVER.

ALLEN CHAPMAN

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RALPH OF THE ROUNDHOUSE

CHAPTER I--THE DAYLIGHT EXPRESS

The Daylight Express rolled up to the depot at Stanley Junction, on time, circling past the repair shops, freight yard and roundhouse, a thing of life and beauty.

Stanley Junction had become a wide-awake town of some importance since the shops had been moved there, and when a second line took it in as a passing point, the old inhabitants pronounced the future of the Junction fully determined.

Engine No. 6, with its headlight shining like a piece of pure crystal, its metal trimmings furbished up bright and natty-looking, seemed to understand that it was the model of the road, and sailed majestically to a repose that had something of dignity and grandeur to it.

The usual crowd that kept tab on arriving trains lounged on the platform, and watched the various passengers alight.

A brisk, bright-faced young fellow glided from their midst, cleared an obstructing truck with a clever spring, stood ready to greet the locomotive and express car as they parted company from the passenger coaches, and ran thirty feet along the siding to where the freight-sheds stood.

He appeared to know everybody, and to be a general favorite with every one, for the brakeman at the coach-end air brake gave him a cheery: "Hi, there, kid!" gaunt John Griscom, the engineer, flung him a grim but pleased nod of recognition, and the fireman, discovering him, yelled a shrill: "All aboard, now!"

The young fellow turned to face the latter with a whirl and struck an attitude, as if entirely familiar with jolly Sam Cooper's warnings.

For the latter, reaching for a row of golden pippins stowed on his oil shelf, contributed by some bumpkin admirer down the line, seized the biggest and poised it for a fling.

"Here she goes, Ralph Fairbanks!" he chuckled.

"Let her come!" cried back Ralph, and--clip! he cut the missile's career short by the latest approved baseball tactics.

Ralph pocketed the apple with a gay laugh, and was at the door of the express section of the car as it slid back and the messenger's face appeared.

The agent had come out of his shed. He glanced over an iron chest and some crated stuff shoved forward by the messenger, and then, running his eye over the bills of lading handed him by the latter, said briskly:

"You will not be needed this time, Ralph."

"All right, Mr. More."

"Nothing but some transfer freight and the bank delivery--that's my special, you know. Be around for the 5.11, though."

"Sure," nodded Ralph Fairbanks, looking pleased at the brisk dismissal, like a boy on hand for work, but, that failing, with abundant other resources at hand to employ and enjoy the time.

With a cheery hail to the baggage master as he appeared on the scene, Ralph rounded the cow-catcher, intent on a short cut across the tracks. His appearance had been actuated by business reasons strictly, but, business not materializing, he was quite as practical and eager on another tack.

Ever since vacation began, three weeks previous, Ralph had made two trips daily to the depot, on hand to meet the arriving 10.15 and 5.11 trains.

This had been at the solicitation of the express agent. Stanley Junction was not a very large receiving point, but usually there were daily several packages to deliver. When these were not for the bank or business houses in the near center of the town, but for individuals, the agent employed Ralph to deliver them, allowing him to retain the ten cents fee for charges.

Sometimes Ralph picked up as high as fifty cents a day, the average was about half that amount, but it was welcome pocket money. Occasionally, too, some odd job for waiting passengers or railroad employes would come up. It gave Ralph spending money with which to enjoy his vacation, and, besides, he liked the work.

Especially work around the railroad. What live boy in Stanley Junction did not--but then Ralph, as the express agent often said, "took to railroading like a duck to water."

It was a natural heritage. Ralph's father had been a first-class, all-around

railroad man, and his son felt a justifiable pride in boasting that he was one of the pioneers who had made the railroad at Stanley Junction a possibility.

"Home, a quick bite or two, and then for the baseball game," said Ralph briskly, as he ran his eye across the network of rails, and beyond them to the waving tree tops and the village green. Preparing to make a run for it, Ralph suddenly halted.

A grimed repair man, tapping the wheels of the coaches, just then jerked back his hammer with a vivid:

"Hi, you!"

Ralph discerned that the man was not addressing him, for his eyes were staringly fixed under the trucks.

"Let me out!" sounded a muffled voice.

Ralph was interested, as there struggled from the cindered roadbed an erratic form. It was that of a boy about his own age. He judged this from the dress and figure, although one was tattered, and the other strained, crippled and bent. The face was a criss-cross streak of dust, oil and cinders.

"A stowaway!" yelled the repair man, excitedly waving his hammer. "Schmitt! Schmitt! this way!"

The depot officer came running around the end of the train at the call. Ralph had eyes only for the forlorn figure that had so suddenly come into action in the light of day.

He could read the lad's story readily. The last run of No. 6 was of ten miles. There was no doubt but that for this distance, if not for a greater one, the stowaway had been a "dead-head" passenger, perilously clinging to the brace bars, or wedged against the trucks under the middle coach.

The dust and grime must have half-blinded him, the roar have deafened, for he staggered about now in an aimless, distracted way, hobbling and wincing as he tried to get his cramped muscles into normal play.

"What you doing?" roared the old watchman, on a run, and waving his club threateningly.

"I've done it!" muttered the boy dolefully. He kept hobbling about to get his tensioned nerves unlimbered, edging away from the approaching watchman as fast as he could.

"Show me!" he panted, appealingly to Ralph,

The latter understood the predicament and wish. He moved his hand very meaningly, and the stowaway seemed to comprehend, for he glided to where a heap of ties barricaded a dead-end track. Rubbing the blinding dirt from his eyes, he cleared the heap, dropped on the other side, and ran down a narrow lane bounded on one side by a brick wall and on the other by a ten-foot picket fence.

"Third one in a week!" growled the watchman. "Got to stop! Against the

law, and second one lost a foot!"

Ralph moved along, crossed four tracks and a freight train blockaded, and kept on down the straight rails. The stowaway had passed from his mind. Now, glancing toward the fence, he saw the lad limping down the lane.

The stowaway saw him, and coming to a halt grasped two of the fence bars, and peered and shouted at him.

"Want me?" asked Ralph, approaching. He saw that the stowaway was in bad shape, for he clung to the fence as if it rested him. He had not yet gotten all the cricks out of his bones.

"It was a tough job," muttered the boy. "It took grit! Say, tell me something, will you?"

Ralph nodded. The boy rubbed the knuckle of one hand across his coat to wipe off the blood of an abrasion, and groped in a pocket.

"Where is that?" he asked, bringing to light an envelope, and holding it slantingly for Ralph's inspection. "Can you tell me?"

"Why," said Ralph, with a start--"let me look at that!"

"No," demurred the other cautiously. "It's near enough to read. I want to find that person."

"It's my name," said Ralph, quickly and with considerable wonderment. "Give it to me."

"I guess not!" snapped the stowaway. "I don't know who John Fairbanks is, but I know enough to be sure you ain't him."

"No, he was my father. Climb over the fence. I don't quite understand this, and I want you to explain."

The stowaway sized up the fence, wincing as he lifted one foot, and then, with a disgusted exclamation, turned abruptly and broke into a run.

Ralph saw that the cause of this action was the watchman, who had come into view through a doorway in the brick wall, and had started a new pursuit of the boy.

He was a husky, clumsy individual, and had counted on heading off or creeping unawares on the fugitive, but the latter, with a start, soon outdistanced him, and was lost to Ralph's view where the lane broadened out into the railroad scrap yards.

Ralph stood undecided for a minute or two, and then somewhat reluctantly resumed his way.

"He'll find us, if he's got that letter to deliver," he concluded. "I wonder what it can be? From somebody who doesn't know father is dead, it seems."

Ralph neared home in the course of ten minutes, to save time crossing lots to reach by its side door the plain, but comfortable looking, neatly kept cottage that had been his shelter since childhood.

It was going to be a busy day with him, he had planned, and he flung off his coat with a business air of hurried preparation for a change of toilet.

Ten feet from the door through which he intended to bolt as usual with all the impetuosity of a real flesh and blood boy, on the jump every waking minute of his existence, Ralph came to an abrupt halt.

He expected to find his mother alone, and was ready to tell her about the stowaway episode and the letter.

But voices echoed from the little sitting room, and the first intelligible words his ear caught, spoken in a gruff snarl, made Ralph's eyes flash fire, his fists clenched, and his breath came quick.

"Very well, Widow Fairbanks," fell distinctly on Ralph's hearing, "what's the matter with that good-for-nothing son of yours going to work and paying the honest debts of the family?"

CHAPTER II--WAKING UP

Ralph recognized that strident voice at once. It belonged to Gasper Farrington, one of the wealthiest men of Stanley Junction, and one of the meanest.

Whenever Ralph had met the man, and he met him often, one fact had been vividly impressed upon his mind. Gasper Farrington had a natural antipathy for all boys in general, and for Ralph Fairbanks in particular.

The Criterion Baseball Club was a feature with juvenile Stanley Junction, yet they had many a privilege abrogated through the influence of Farrington. He had made complaints on the most trivial pretexts, winning universal disrespect and hatred from the younger population.

More than once he had put himself out to annoy Ralph. In one instance the latter had stood for the rights of the club in a lawyer-like manner. He had beaten Farrington and the town board combined on technical legal grounds as to the occupancy of a central ball field, and Ralph's feelings towards the crabbed old capitalist had then settled down to dislike, mingled with a certain silent independence that nettled Farrington considerably.

He had publicly dubbed Ralph "the ringleader of those baseball hoodlums," a stricture passed up by the club with indifference.

Ralph never set his eyes on Farrington but he was reminded of his father. John Fairbanks had come to Stanley Junction before the Great Northern was even thought of. He had thought of it first. A practical railroad man, he had gone through all the grades of promotion of an Eastern railway system, and had become a division superintendent.

He had some money when he came to Stanley Junction. He foresaw that the town would one day become a tactical center in railroad construction, submitted a plan to some capitalists, and was given supervisory work along the line.

His minor capital investment in the enterprise was obscured by mightier interests later on, but before he died it was generally supposed that he held quite an amount of the bonds of the railroad, mutually with Gasper Farrington.

It was a surprise to his widow, and to friends generally of the Fairbanks family, when, after Mr. Fairbanks' death, a few hundred dollars in the bank and the homestead, with a twelve-hundred dollar mortgage on it in favor of Gasper Farrington, were found to comprise the total estate.

Mrs. Fairbanks discovered letters, memoranda and receipts showing that her deceased husband and Farrington had been mutually engaged in several business enterprises, but they were vague and fragmentary, and, after ascertaining from her the extent of her documentary evidence, Farrington bluntly declared he had been a loser by her husband.

He professed a friendship for the dead railroader, however, and in a patronizing way offered to help the widow out of her difficulties by taking the homestead off her hands for the amount of the mortgage, "and making no trouble."

Mrs. Fairbanks had promptly informed him that she had no intention of selling out, and for two years, until the present time, had been able to meet the quarterly interest on the mortgage when due.

Gasper Farrington was now on one of his periodical visits on business to the cottage, but as, right at the home threshold, and in the presence of the gentle, loving-hearted widow, he gave utterance to the scathing remark still burning in the listener's ears, a boy of true spirit, Ralph's soul seemed suddenly to expand as though it would burst with indignation and excitement.

Many times Ralph had asked his mother concerning their actual business relations with Gasper Farrington, but she had put him off with the evasive remark that he was "too young to understand."

But now he seemed to understand. The spiteful tone of the crabbed old capitalist implied that he indulged in the present malicious outburst because in some way he had the widow in his power.

Ralph took an instantaneous step forward, but paused. He could trust his mother to retain her dignity on all occasions, and he recalled her frequent directions to him to never act on an angry impulse.

Now he could see into the room. His mother stood by her sewing basket, a slight flush of indignation on her face.

Farrington squirmed against the doorway, fumbling his cane, and puffing and purple with violent internal commotion.

"Then what's the matter with that idle, good-for-nothing, son of yours going to work and paying the honest debts of the family!" he stormily repeated.

The widow looked up. Her lips fluttered, but she said calmly: "Mr. Farrington, Ralph is neither idle nor good-for-nothing."

"Huh! aint! What's he good for?"

The widow's face became momentarily glorified, the true mother love shone in the depths of her pure, clear eyes.

"He is the best son a mother ever had." She spoke with a tremor that made Ralph thrill, and must have made Farrington squirm.

"He is affectionate, obedient, considerate. And that is why I have never burdened his young shoulders with my troubles."

"It's high time, then!" snarled Farrington--"a big, overgrown bumpkin! Guess he'll shoulder some responsibility soon, or some one else will, or you'll all be without a shelter."

Ralph felt a sinking at the heart at the vague threat. He was relieved, however, as anxiously glancing at his mother's face he observed that she was not a whit disturbed or frightened.

"Mr. Farrington," she said, "Ralph has nothing to do with our business affairs, but I wish to say this: I am satisfied that my dead husband left means we have never been able to trace. It lies between your conscience and yourself to say how much more you know about this than I do. I have accepted the situation, however, and with the few dollars in ready money he left me, and my sewing, I have managed to so far give Ralph a fair education. He has well deserved the sacrifice. He has been foremost in every athletic sport, a leader and of good influence with his mates, and was the best scholar at the school, last term."

"Oho! prize pupil in the three R's!" sneered Farrington--"Counts high, that honor does!"

"It is a step upwards, humble though it be," retorted Mrs. Fairbanks proudly. "If he does as well in his academic career----"

"In his what?" fairly bellowed Farrington. "Is the woman crazy? You don't mean to tell me, madam, that you have any such wild idea in your head as sending him to college?"

"I certainly have."

"Then you'll never make it--you'll waste your dollars, and bring him up a pampered ingrate, and he's a sneak if he allows his old mother to dig and slave her fingers off for his worthless pleasure!"

A faint flush crossed the widow's face. Ralph burst the bounds. He sprang forward, and confronted the astonished magnate so abruptly that in the confusion of the moment, Farrington dropped his cane.

"Mr. Farrington," said Ralph, striving hard to keep control of himself, "my mother is not old, but I am--older than I was an hour ago, I can tell you! old enough to understand what I never knew before, and----"

"Hello!" sniffed Farrington, "what's this your business?"

"I just overheard you say it was essentially my business," answered Ralph. "I begin to think so myself. At all events, I'm going to take a hand in my mother's affairs hereafter. If I have hitherto been blind to the real facts, it was because I had the best mother in the world, and never realized the big sacrifice she was making for me."

"Bah!"

"Mr. Farrington," continued Ralph, seeming to grow two inches taller under the influence of some new, elevating idea suddenly finding lodgment in his mind, "as a person fully awakened to his own general worthlessness and idle, good-for-nothing character, and in duty bound to pay the honest debts of the family--to quote your own words--what is your business here?"

"My business!" gasped Farrington, "you, you--none of your business! Mrs. Fairbanks," he shouted, waving his cane and almost exploding with rage, "I've said my say, and I shan't stay here to be insulted by a pert chit of a boy. You'd better think it over! I'll give you five hundred dollars to surrender the house and get out of Stanley Junction. Decline that, and fail to pay me the interest due to-day, and I'll close down on you--I'll sell you out!"

"Can he do it?" whispered Ralph, in an anxious tone.

"No, Ralph," said his mother. "Mr. Farrington, I believe I have thirty days in which to pay the interest?"

"It's due to-day."

"I believe I have thirty days," went on the widow quietly. "It is the first time I have been delinquent. I have even now within twenty dollars of the amount. Before the thirty days are over you shall have your money."

"I'll serve you legal notice before night!" growled Farrington--"I don't wait on promises, I don't!"

There were hot words hovering on Ralph's lips. It would do him good, he felt, to give the heartless old capitalist a piece of his mind. A glance from his mother checked him.

She was the gracious, courteous lady in every respect as she ushered her unpleasant visitor from the house.

Her heart was full in more ways than one as she returned to the little sitting room. A predominating emotion filled her thoughts. She understood Ralph's

mind thoroughly, and realized that circumstances had, as he had himself declared, "awakened him."

She had intuitively traced in his manner and words a change from careless, boyish impetuosity to settled, manly resolution, and was thankful in her heart of hearts.

"Ralph!" she called softly.

But Ralph was gone.

CHAPTER III--A LOST BALL

Ralph Fairbanks had "woke up," had seen a great light, had formed a mighty resolution all in a minute, and was off like a flash.

As he bolted through the doorway it seemed as if wings impelled him.

He realized what a good mother he had, and how much she had done for him.

Following that was one overwhelming conclusion: to prove how he appreciated the fact.

"Yes," he said, as he hurried along, "I'd be a sneak to let my mother slave while I went sliding easy through life. If I've done it so far, it was because I never guessed there wasn't something left from father's estate to support us, and never stopped to think that there mightn't be. She's hidden everything from me, in her kind, good way. Well, I'll pay her back. I see the nail I'm to hit on the head, and I'll drive it home before I'm twenty-four hours older!"

Gasper Farrington had opened a gate on the highway of Ralph Fairbanks' tranquil existence, and, though he never meant it, had aroused the boy's soul to a sudden conception of duty. And Ralph had seen the path beyond, clear and distinct.

It seemed to him as if with one wave of his hand he had swept aside all the fervid dreams of boyhood, formed a resolution, set his mark, and was started in that very minute on a brand-new life.

Ralph did not slacken his gait until he reached a square easily identified as a much used ball grounds.

Over in one corner was a flat, rambling structure. It had once been somebody's home, had fallen into decay and vacancy. The club had rented it for a nominal sum, fixed it up a bit, and this was headquarters.

Over the door hung the purple pennant of the club, bearing in its center a broad, large "C." In the doorway sat Ned Talcott, an ambitious back-stop, who spent most of his time about the place, never tired of the baseball atmosphere.

He looked curiously at Ralph's flustered appearance, but the latter nodded silently, passed inside, and then called out:

"Come in here, Ned--I want to see you."

Ned was by his side in a jiffy. An enthusiast, he fairly worshiped his expert whole-souled captain, and counted it an honor to do anything for him.

"None of the crowd here, I see," remarked Ralph. "Got your uniform yet, Ned?"

"Why, no," answered Ned. "I've got the cloth picked out, and it's all right. Father's away, though, and as we won't need the suits for show till the new series begin next week, I didn't hurry."

"We're about of a size," went on Ralph, looking his companion over.

"And resemblance stops right there, eh?" chuckled Ned.

"I was thinking," pursued Ralph with business-like terseness, as he unfastened the door of his locker. "Maybe we could strike a trade? I want to sell."

He drew out his baseball uniform, tastily reposing in a big pasteboard box just as he had brought it from the tailor that morning.

"I've been thinking maybe I could strike a deal with some one to take this off my hands," he added.

"Eh!" ejaculated Ned, in a bewildered way.

"Yes, you see it's brand-new, whole outfit complete, haven't even put it on yet."

"You'll look nobby in it when you do have it on!"

Ralph said nothing on this score, compressing his lips a trifle.

"It cost me eight dollars," he continued, after a moment's silence.

"Yes, I know that's the regular price."

"It fits you, or, with very slight alteration, can be made to. I wish you'd try it on, Ned, and give me five dollars for it."

"Why, I don't understand, Ralph?" faltered Ned, completely puzzled.

Ralph winced. He realized that there would be a general commotion when he told the rest of the club what he was now vaguely intimating to Ned Talcott.

Ralph did not flatter himself a particle when he comprehended that every member of the nine was his friend, champion and admirer, and that a general protest would go up from the ranks when he announced his intentions.

"Is it a bargain?" he asked, smiling quizzically at Ned's puzzled face. "See

here, I'd better out with it. I shan't need the uniform, Ned, because I've got to resign from the club."

"Oh, never!" vociferated Ned, starting back in dismay. "Say, now----"

"Yes, say that again, Ralph Fairbanks!" broke in a challenging voice.

Ralph was shaken a trifle by the unexpected interruption. His lips set even a little firmer, however, as he turned and faced his trusty first baseman, Will Cheever, and in his train four other members of the club.

"It's true," said Ralph seriously, "just as it is sudden and sure. I've got to drop athletics as a sport, fellows--for a time, anyhow--and I've got to do it right away."

"You're dreaming!" scoffed Cheever, bustling up in his inimitable, push-ahead way, and pulling Ralph playfully about. "Resign? Huh! On the last test game--with the pennant almost ours? Gag him!"

"Why," drawled a tone of pathetic alarm, "it would be rank treachery, you know!"

"Hello, are you awake?" jeered Will, turning on the last speaker.

Ralph looked at him too, and through some wayward perversity of his nature his face grew more determined than ever. His eyes flashed quickly, and he regarded the speaker with disfavor, but he kept silence.

"You won't do it, you know!" blundered the newcomer, making his way forward. "It would queer the whole kit. What have we been working for? To get the bulge, and run the circuit. Why, I've just counted on it!"

Grif Farrington, for that was the speaker's name, expressed the intensest sense of personal injury as he spoke.

He was the nephew of Gasper Farrington, although he did not resemble his uncle in any striking particular as to form or feature. Both were of the same genus, however, for the crabbed capitalist was universally designated "a shark" by his neighbors.

Grif was a fat, overgrown fellow, with big saucer eyes and flabby cheeks and chin. "Bullhead" some of the boys had dubbed him. But they often found that what they mistook for stupidity was in reality indolence, and that in any deal where his own selfish concern was involved Grif managed to come out the winner.

As Ralph did not speak, Grif grew even more voluble.

"I say, it would be rank treachery!" he declared. "And a shame to treat a club so. If we lose this game we're ditched for only scrub home games. Win it, and we are the champion visiting club all over the county. That's what we have been working for. Are you going to spoil it? Haven't I put up like a man when the club was behind. See here, Ralph Fairbanks, I'll give you--I'll make it five dollars if you'll keep in for just this afternoon's game."

"Shut up, you chump!" warned Will Cheever, slipping between the boor and

Ralph, whose color was rising dangerously fast.

Will pushed aside Grif's pocketbook, linked an arm in that of Ralph, and led him from the building, winking encouragingly to his mates.

He came back to the group in about a quarter of an hour, but alone.

"Fixed it?" inquired half a dozen eager voices.

"Yes, I've fixed it," said Cheever, though none too cordially. "He's going to leave us, fellows, and it's too bad! He'll play the game this afternoon, but that's the last."

"What's up?" put in Grif Farrington, in his usual coarsely inquisitive way.

"You was nearly up--or down!" snapped Cheever tartly. "You nearly spoiled things for us. Money isn't everything, if you have got lots of it, and haven't the sense to know that it's an insult to offer to buy what Ralph Fairbanks would give to his friends for nothing, or not at all!"

When the game was called at two o'clock, Ralph was on hand.

He was the object of more than ordinary interest to his own and the opposition club that afternoon. The word had gone the rounds that he had practically resigned from service, and the fact caused great speculation. His nearest friends detected a certain serious change in him that puzzled them. They knew him well enough to discern that something of unusual weight lay upon his mind.

According to enthusiastic little Tom Travers, Ralph Fairbanks was "just splendid!" that afternoon. Whatever Ralph had on his mind, he did not allow it to interfere with the work on hand.

Ralph was the heaviest batter of the club, and on this particular occasion he conducted himself brilliantly, and the pennant was the property of the Criterions long before the fifth inning was completed. The club was in ecstasies, and Grif Farrington, who had money and time for spending it, wore a grin of placid self-satisfaction on his flat, fat face.

"Whoop!" yelled Will Cheever, as the ninth inning went out in a blaze of baseball glory.

Will posed to give Ralph, bat in hand, a royal "last one." It was Ralph's farewell to the beloved diamond field. He poised the bat and caught the ball with a masterly stroke that had something cannon-like in its execution.

Crack! he sent it flying obliquely, and felt as if with that final stroke he had driven baseball with all its lovely attributes dear out of his life.

Smash! the ball grazed the high brick wall around the old unused factory to the left, struck an upper window, shattered a pane to atoms, and disappeared.

"Lost ball!" jeered little Tom Travers.

No one went after it. The fence surrounding the factory bore two signs that deterred--one was "Trespassers Will Be Prosecuted," and the other announced that it was "For Rent, by the owner, Gasper Farrington."

Ralph made a grimace, and a mental note of later mending the breakage for which he was responsible.

Will Cheever caught him up as he was heading for home.

"See here, Ralph," he remarked, "if you wasn't so abominably close-mouthed---"

"About what?" challenged Ralph, pleasantly serious. "Why, there's no mystery about my resigning. I had to do it."

"Why?"

"I've got to go to work. My mother needs the money, and I'm old enough."

"What you going to work at?" inquired Will, with real interest.

"Railroading,--if I can get it to do."

CHAPTER IV--IKE SLUMP'S DINNER PAIL

Ralph hurried home. His mother had gone temporarily to some neighbors, he judged, for the house was open, and the midday lunch he had purposely avoided was still spread on the table.

He ate with a zest, but in a hurry. His mind was working actively, and he hoped to accomplish results before he had an interview with his mother, and was glad when he got away from the house again without meeting her.

Ralph went down to the depot. He was not in a communicative mood, and did not exchange greetings with many friends there. When the 5.11 train came in there were two packages to deliver. He attended to these promptly, and was back at the express shed just as the agent was closing up for the day.

"All square, Fairbanks?" he inquired, as Ralph handed him the receipt book.

"Yes," nodded Ralph. "They paid me. I want to thank you for all the little jobs you have thrown in my way, Mr. More. It has helped me through wonderfully. You haven't anything permanent you could fit me into, have you?"

"Eh?" ejaculated the agent, with a critical stare at Ralph. "Why, no. Looking for a regular job, Fairbanks?"

"I've got to," answered Ralph.

"Railroading?"

"Any branch of it."

"For steady?"

"Yes, I think it's my line."

"I think so, too," nodded the agent decisively, "You haven't made loaf and play of what little you've done for me. There's no show here, though. I get only forty-five dollars a month, and have to help with the freight at that, but if you are headed for the presidency----"

Ralph smiled.

"Start in the right way, and that is at the bottom of the ladder. You don't want office work?"

"That would take me to general headquarters at Springfield," demurred Ralph, "and I don't want to leave mother alone--just yet."

"I see. There's nothing at the shops down at Acton, where you could go and come home every day, except a trade, and you're not the boy to stop at master mechanic."

"Oh, come now! Mr. More----"

"You can't look too far ahead," declared the agent sapiently. "Dropping jollying, though, we narrow down to real service. There's your Starting point, my boy, plain, sure and simple, and don't you forget it--and don't you miss it!"

He extended his finger down the rails.

"The roundhouse?" said Ralph, following his indication.

"The roundhouse, Fairbanks, the first step, and I never knew a genuine, all-around railroad man who didn't make his start in the business in the oil bins."

"What is the main qualification to recommend a fellow?" asked Ralph.

"An old suit of clothes, a tough hide, and lots of grit."

"I think, then, I can come well indorsed," laughed Ralph. "Whom do I see?"

"Usually the ambitious father of a future railway president goes through the regular application course at headquarters," explained the agent, "but if you want quick action----"

"I do."

"See the foreman."

"Who is he?"

"Tim Forgan. If he takes you on, and you get to be a fixture, the application route is handy later, when you think you deserve promotion."

"Thank you," said Ralph, and walked away thoughtfully.

He had five dollars in his pocket that Ned Talcott had given him for his uniform, and eighty cents in loose change. This made Ralph feel quite free and easy. He had not a single disturbing thought on his mind at present except the broken window at the old factory, and that was easily fixed up, he told himself.

So, in quite an elevated frame of mind, Ralph walked down the rails. The roundhouse was his objective point. Ralph had been there many a time before, but only as a visitor.

Now he was interested in a practical way, and the oil sheds, dog house, turntable and other adjuncts of this favored center of activity fascinated him more than ever.

He had a nodding acquaintance with some of the firemen and engineers, but was not fortunate enough to meet any of these on the present occasion.

Ralph went along the hard-beaten cinder path, worn by many feet, that circled the one-story structure which sheltered the locomotives, and glancing through the high-up open windows caught the railroad flavor more and more as he viewed the stalls holding this and that puffing, dying or stone-dead "iron horse."

Over the sill of one of these windows there suddenly protruded a black, greasy hand holding a square dinner pail. It came out directly over Ralph's head, and halted him.

Its owner sounded a low whistle and a return whistle quite as low and suspicious echoed behind Ralph.

"Take it, and hustle!" followed from beyond the window, and almost mechanically Ralph Fairbanks put up his hand, the handle of the pail slipped into his fingers, and he uttered an ejaculation.

For the pail was as heavy as if loaded with gold, and bore him quite doubled down before he got his equilibrium. Then it was jerked from his grasp, and a gruff voice said:

"Hands off! What you meddling for?"

"Meddling?" retorted Ralph abruptly, and looked the speaker over with suspicion. He was a ragged, unkempt man of about forty, with a swarthy, vicious face. "I was told to take it, wasn't I?"

"Hullo! what's up? Who are you? Oh! Fairbanks."

The speaker was the person who had passed out the dinner pail, and who, apparently aroused by the colloquy outside, had clambered to a bench, and now thrust his head out of the window. He looked startled at first, then directed a quick, meaning glance at the tramp, who disappeared as if by magic. The boy overhead scowled darkly at Ralph, and then thought better of it, and tried to appear friendly.

"I give the poor beggar what's left of my dinner for carrying my pail home, so I won't be bothered with it," he said.

The speaker's face showed he did not at all believe that keen-witted Ralph Fairbanks accepted this gauzy explanation, after hefting that pail, but Ralph said nothing.

"What's up, Fairbanks?" inquired his shock-headed interlocutor at the

window--"sort of inspecting things?"

Ralph, preparing to pass on, nodded silently.

"Trying to break in, eh?"

"Is there any chance?" inquired Ralph, pausing slightly.

Ike Slump laughed boisterously. He was a year or two older than Ralph, but had a face prematurely developed with cunning and tobacco, and looked twenty-five.

"Yes," he said, "if you're anxious to get boiled, blistered, oiled and blinded twenty times a day, be kicked from platform to pit, and paid just about enough to buy arnica and sticking plaster!"

"Bad as that?" interrogated Ralph dubiously.

"For a fact!"

"Oh, well--there's something beyond."

"Beyond what?"

"When you get out of the oil and cinders, and up into the sand and steam."

"Huh! lots of chance. I've been here six months, and I haven't had a smell of firing yet--even second best."

Ralph again nodded, and again started on. He did not care to have anything to do with Ike Slump. The latter belonged to the hoodlum gang of Stanley Junction, and whenever his crowd had met the better juvenile element, there had always been trouble.

Ike's ferret face worked queerly as he noted Ralph's departure. He seemed struggling with uneasy emotions, as if one or two troublesome thoughts bothered him.

"Hold on, Fairbanks!" he called, edging farther over the sill. "I say, that dinner pail----"

"Oh, I'm not interested in your dinner pail," observed Ralph.

"Course not--what is there to be curious about? I say, though, was you in earnest about getting a job here?"

"I must get work somewhere."

"And it will be railroading?"

"If I can make it,"

"You're the kind that wins," acknowledged Ike. "Got any coin, now?"

"Suppose I have?"

Ike's weazel-like eyes glowed.

"Suppose you have? Then I can steer you up against a real investment of the A1 class."

Ralph looked quizzically incredulous.

"I can," persisted Ike Slump. "You want to get in here to work, don't you? Well, you can't make it."

"Why can't I?"

"Without my help--I can give you that help. You give me a dollar, and I'll give you a tip."

"What kind of a tip?"

"About a vacancy."

"Is there going to be one?"

"There is, I can tell you when, and I can give you first chance on the game, and deliver the goods."

Ralph was interested.

"If you are telling the truth," he said finally, "I'd risk half a dollar."

Ralph took out the coin. A sight of it settled the matter for Ike.

He reached for it eagerly.

"All right, I'm the vacancy. You watch around, for soon as I get my pay tomorrow I'm going to bolt. It's confidential, though, Fairbanks--you'll remember that?"

"Oh, sure."

Ike Slump was a notorious liar, but Ralph believed him in the present instance. Anyhow, he felt he was making progress. He planned to be on hand the next day, prepared for the expected vacancy, and incidentally wondered what had made Ike Slump's dinner pail so tremendously heavy, and, also, as to the identity of the trampish individual who had disappeared with it so abruptly.

He wandered about half a mile down the tracks where they widened out from the main line into the freight yards, and selected a pile of ties remote from any present activity in the neighborhood to have a quiet think.

He determined to see the foreman, Tim Forgan, the first thing in the morning, and discover what the outlook was in general. If absolutely turned down, he would await the announced resignation of Mr. Ike Slump.

Ralph understood that a green engine wiper in the roundhouse was paid six dollars a week to commence on if a boy, nine dollars if a man. He picked up a torn freight ticket drifting by in the breeze, and fell to figuring industriously, and the result was pleasant and reassuring.

Ralph looked up, as with prodigious whistlings a single locomotive came tearing down the rails, took the outer main track, and was lost to sight.

Not two minutes later a second described the same maneuver. Ralph arose, wondering somewhat.

Looking down the rails towards the depot, he noticed unusual activity in the vicinity of the roundhouse.

A good many hands were gathered at the turntable, as if some excitement was up. Then a third engine came down the rails rapidly, and Ralph noticed that the main "out" signal was turned to "clear tracks."

As the third locomotive passed him, he noticed that the engineer strained his sight ahead in a tensioned way, and the fireman piled in the coal for the fullest pressure head of steam.

Ralph made a start for home, reached a crossroad, and was turning down it when a new shrill series of whistles directed his attention to locomotive No. 4. It came down the rails in the same remarkable and reckless manner as its recent predecessors.

"Something's up!" decided Ralph, with an uncontrollable thrill of interest and excitement--"I wonder what?"

CHAPTER V--OPPORTUNITY

The boy turned and ran back to the culvert crossing just as the fourth locomotive whizzed past the spot.

He waved his hand and yelled out an inquiry as to what was up, but cab and tender flashed by in a sheet of steam and smoke.

He recognized the engineer, however. It was gruff old John Griscom, and in the momentary glimpse Ralph had of his hard, rugged face he looked grimmer than ever.

Ralph marveled at his presence here, for Griscom had the crack run of the road, the 10.15, driven by the biggest twelve-wheeler on the line, and was something of an industrial aristocrat. The locomotive he now propelled was a third-class freight engine, and had no fireman on the present occasion so far as could be seen.

Ralph knew enough about runs, specials and extras, to at once comprehend that something very unusual had happened, or was happening.

Whatever it was, extreme urgency had driven out this last locomotive, for Griscom wore his off-duty suit, and it was plain to be seen had not had time to change it.

Ralph's eyes blankly followed the locomotive. Then he started after it. Five hundred feet down the rails, a detour of a gravel pit sent the tracks rounding to a stretch, below which, in a clump of greenery, half a dozen of the firemen and engineers of the road had their homes.

With a jangle and a shiver the old heap of junk known as 99 came to a stop. Then its whistle began a series of tootings so shrill and piercing that the effect was fairly ear-splitting.

Ralph recognized that they were telegraphic in their import. Very often, he knew, locomotives would sound a note or two, slow up just here to take hands down to the roundhouse, but old Griscom seemed not only calling some one, but calling fiercely and urgently, and adding a whole volume of alarm warnings.

Ralph kept on down the track and doubled his pace, determined now to overtake the locomotive and learn the cause of all this rush and commotion.

As he neared 99, he discerned that the veteran engineer was hustling tremendously. Usually impassive and exact when in charge of the superb 10.15, he was now a picture of almost irritable activity.

Having thrown off his coat, he fired in some coal, impatiently gave the whistle a further exercise, and leaning from the cab window yelled lustily towards the group of houses beyond the embankment.

Just as Ralph reached the end of the tender, he saw emerging from the shaded path down the embankment a girl of twelve. He recognized her as the daughter of jolly Sam Cooper, the fireman.

She was breathless and pale, and she waved her hand up to the impatient engineer with an agitated:

"Was you calling pa, Mr. Griscom?"

"Was I calling him!" growled the gruff old bear--"did he think I was piping for the birds?"

"Oh, Mr. Griscom, he can't come, he----"

"He's got to come! It's life and death! Couldn't he tell it, when he saw me on this crazy old wreck, and shoving up the gauge to bursting point. Don't wait a second--he's got to come!"

"Oh, Mr. Griscom, he's in bed, crippled. Ran into a scythe in the garden, and his ankle is cut terrible. Mother's worried to death, and he won't be able to take the regular run for days and days."

Old Griscom stormed like a pirate. He glared down the tracks towards the roundhouse. Then he shouted ferociously:

"Tell Evans to come, then--not a minute to lose!"

"Mr. Evans has gone for the doctor, for pa," answered the girl.

Griscom nearly had a fit. He flung his big arms around as if he wanted to smash something. He glanced at his watch, and slapped his hand on the lever with an angry yell.

"Can't go back for an extra!" Ralph heard him shout, "and what'll I do? Rot the road! I'll try it alone, but----"

He gave the lever a jerk, the wheels started up. Ralph thought he understood

the situation. He sprang to the step.

"Get out--no junketing here--life and death--Hello, Fairbanks!"

"Mr. Griscom," spoke Ralph, "what's the trouble?"

"Trouble--the shops at Acton are on fire, not a locomotive within ten miles, and all the transfer freight hemmed in."

Ralph felt a thrill of interest and excitement.

"Is that so?" he breathed. "I see--they need help?"

"I guess so, and quick. Out of the way!"

The old engineer hustled about the cab, set the machinery whizzing at top-notch speed, and seized the fire shovel.

"Mr. Griscom," cried Ralph, catching on by a sort of inspiration, "let me--let me do that."

"Eh--what----"

Ralph drew the shovel from his unresisting hands.

"You can't do both," he insisted--"you can't drive and fire. Just tell me what to do."

"Can you shovel coal?"

"I can try."

"Here, not that way--" as Ralph opened the furnace door in a clumsy manner. "That's it, more--hustle, kid! That'll do. No talking, now."

Griscom sprang to the cushion. For two minutes he was absorbed, looking ahead, timing himself, reading the gauge, in a fume and sweat, like a trained greyhound eager to strike the home stretch.

Suddenly he ran his head and shoulders far past the window sill, and uttered one of his characteristic alarm yells.

"Rot the road!" he shouted. "No flags!"

He reached over for the tool box, and slammed up its cover. He pawed over a dozen or more soiled flags of different colors, snatched up two, shook out their white folds, and then, as the speeding engine nearly jumped the track at a switch, flopped back the lever.

"Set them," he ordered.

In his absorbed excitement he seemed to forget the dangerous mission he was setting, for a novice, Ralph did not ask a question. He threw in some coal, then taking the flags in one hand, he crept out through the forward window.

It was his first experience in that line. The swishing wind, the teeter-like swaying of the engine, the driving hail of cinders, all combined to daunt and confuse him, but he clung to the engine rail, gained the pilot, set one flag in its socket, then with a stooping swing the other, and felt his way back to the cab, flushed with satisfaction, but glad to feel a safe footing once more.

Griscom glanced at him out of the corner of his eye, with a growl that might

mean approbation or anything else.

"Fire her up," he ordered.

Ralph had little leisure during the twenty miles run that followed--he did not know till afterwards that they covered it in exactly thirty minutes, a remarkable record for old 99.

As they whirled by stations he noticed a crowd at each. As they rounded the last timbered curve to the south his glance took in a startling sight just ahead of them.

On a lower level stood the car shops. He could see the site in the near distance like a person looking down from an observation tower.

The setting sun made the west a glow of red. Against it were set the shop yards in a yellow dazzle of flame.

A broad sheet of fire ran in and out from building to building, fanned by the fierce breeze. On twenty different tracks, winding about among the structures, were as many freight trains.

This was a general transfer point to a belt line tapping to the south. Two of the engines from Stanley Junction were now rushing towards the outer trains which the flames had not yet reached, to haul them out of the way of the fire. No. 99 whizzed towards this network of rails, hot on the heels of the third locomotive.

The general scene beggared description. Crowds were rushing from the residence settlement near by, an imperfect fire apparatus was at work, and railroad hands were loading trucks with platform freight and carting it to the nearest unexposed space.

Ralph was panting and in a reek from his unusual exertions, but not a bit tired. Griscom directed a critical glance at him, caught the excited and determined sparkle in his eye, and said in a tone of satisfaction:

"You'll do--if you can stand it out."

"Don't get anybody else, if I will do," said Ralph quickly. "I like it."

Griscom slowed up, shouted to a switchman ahead, using his hand for a speaking trumpet, to set the rails for action. He took advantage of the temporary stop to rake and sift the furnace, put things in trim in expert fireman-like order, and turned to Ralph.

"Now then," he said, "your work's plain--just keep her buzzing."

A yard hand jumped to the pilot with a wave of his arm. Down a long reach of tracks they ran, coupled to some twenty grain cars, backed, set the switch for a safe siding, and came steaming forward for new action.

Little old 99 seemed at times ready to drop to pieces, but she stood the test bravely, braced, tugged and scolded terribly in every loose point and knuckle, but within thirty minutes had conveyed over a hundred cars out of any possible range of the fire.

Ralph, at a momentary cessation of operations, wiped the grime and perspiration from his baked face, to take a scan of the fire-swept area.

A railroad official had come up to the engine, hailed Griscom, and pointed directly into the heart of the flames to where, hemmed in a narrow runway between the walls of two smoking buildings, were four freight cars.

"They'll be gone in five minutes," he observed.

"I can reach them in two," announced Griscom tersely, setting his hand to the lever. "Get a good man to couple--our share won't miss. Let her go!"

A brakeman, winding a coat around his head like a hood, and keeping one end open, sprang to the cowcatcher, link and bar ready.

Ralph shuddered as they ran into the mouth of the lane. It was choked with smoke, burning cinders fell in showers on and under the cab.

"Shove in the coal--shove in the coal!" roared Griscom, eyes ahead, lever under a tensioned control. "Good for you!" he shouted to the nervy brakeman as there was a bump and a snap. "Reverse. We've made it!"

A sweep of flame wreathed the pilot. The air was suffocating. Ralph staggered at his work. As the locomotive reversed and drew quickly out of that dangerous vortex of flame, the boy noticed that the last of the four cars was blazing at the roof.

"Just in time," he heard old Griscom chuckle. "Hot? Whew!"

He set the wheels whirling on the fast backward spin, and stuck his head out of the window to shout encouragingly to the huddled, smoking hero on the pilot.

They were passing a brick building, almost grazing its windows, just then. Of a sudden a curl of smoke from one of these was succeeded by a bursting roar, a leap of flame, and Ralph saw the old engineer enveloped in a blazing cloud.

An explosion had blown out the sash directly in his face. The glass, shivered to a million tiny pieces, came against him like a sheet of hail.

Ralph saw him waver and sprang to his side. The engineer's face was cut in a dozen places, and he had closed his eyes.

"Mr. Griscom," cried Ralph, "are you hurt much?"

"Keep her going," muttered the old hero hoarsely, straightening up, "only, only--tell me."

"You can't see?" breathed Ralph.

"Do as I tell you," came the grim order.

"Switch," said Ralph, in strained, subdued tones as they passed out of the fire belt, ran forward, uncoupled, and sent the four cars down a safe siding, the brakeman and a crowd running after it to extinguish the burning roof of one of the freights.

Ralph saw Griscom strain his sight and blink, and shift the locomotive down

a V, then to the next rails leading in among the burning buildings.

He brought the panting little worker to a pause, asked Ralph to draw a cup of water, brushed his face with his hand, and breathed heavily.

"Mr. Griscom," said Ralph, "you are badly hurt! You can't do anything more, for there's only one car left on the last track, right in the nest of the fire. Let me get somebody to help you where you can be attended to."

He placed a hand pleadingly on the engineer's arm. Old Griscom shook it off in his gruff giant way.

"What's that?" he asked.

He turned his face towards the fire. Ralph looked too, in sudden askance. A crowd surged towards two buildings, nearly consumed, between which lay a single car. The firemen who had been playing a hose just there dropped it, running for their lives.

"Get back!" yelled one of them, as he passed the engine, "or you're gone up. That's a powder car! We just found it out, and it's all ablaze!"

CHAPTER VI--THE MASTER MECHANIC

A man appearing to be a railway official shouted up an order to the haggard engineer as he rushed by.

"Get out of this--there's twenty tons of powder in that car!"

Griscom dashed his hand across his eyes. He seemed to clear them partially, and strained his gaze ahead and took in the meaning of the scene, if not all its vivid outlines, and muttered:

"If that stuff goes off, the whole yards are doomed."

Ralph hung on the engineer's words and hovered at his elbow.

"We had better get out of this, Mr. Griscom," he suggested.

The engineer made a rough, impatient gesture with his arm, and then pulled his young helper to the window.

"Look sharp!" he ordered,

"Yes, Mr. Griscom."

"My--my eyes are pretty bad. When the smoke lifts--what's beyond the car yonder?"

"I can't make out exactly, but I think a clear track."

"How's the furnace?"

"Rushing."

"All right. Now then, you jump off. I'm going to let her go."

Ralph stared hard at the grim old veteran. He could see he was on the verge of physical collapse, and he wondered if his mind was not tottering too; his pertinacity had something weird and astonishing in it.

"Jump!" ordered Griscom, giving the lever a pull.

Ralph did not budge. As he clearly read his companion's purpose, he made up his mind to stick.

The prospect was something awful, and yet, after the previous experiences of that exciting half-hour, he had somehow become inured to danger, and reckless of its risks. The excitement and wild, hustling activity bore a certain stimulating fascination.

With a leap 99 bounded forward at the magic touch of the old king of the lever. It plunged headlong into a whirling vortex of smoke.

A groaning yell went up from the fugitive crowds in the distance, as the intrepid occupants, of the cab disappeared like lost spirits.

Only for the shelter of the cab roof, they would have been deluged with burning sparks.

A tongue of flame took Griscom across the side of his face, and he uttered an angry yell--it seemed to madden him that he could not see clearly. Then as they struck the car they were making for with a heavy thump, the shock and a spasm of weakness drove Griscom from the cushion, and he slipped to the floor of the cab.

Ralph's mind grasped the situation in all its details. He knew the engineer's purpose, and he felt that it was incumbent on him to carry it out if he could do so. He stepped over his recumbent companion, and placed his hand on the lever.

He could not now see ten feet ahead. They were in the very vortex of the fire. Suddenly they shot into the clear, cool air, bracing as a shower bath.

The cab roof was smoking, the cab floor was paved with burning cinders, and some oil waste was blazing back among the coal at the edge of the tender.

Ahead, the top and sides of the powder car were sheeted with flames, which the swift forward movement drove back in shroud-like form.

On the end of the car facing, the grim, black warning: "Powder! Danger!" stared squarely and menacingly into the eye of the pilot front.

Griscom struggled to his feet. He fell against Ralph. The latter thought he was delirious, for his lips were moving, and his tortured face working spasmodi-

cally. Finally he said weakly: "Put my hands on the gearing. We're out of it?"

"Yes, but the car is blazing."

"What's ahead?"

"Dead tracks for nearly a thousand feet."

"And the dump pit beyond?"

"It looks so," said Ralph, leaning from the window and glancing ahead anxiously. "Yes, it's rusted rails clear up to what looks like a slough hole, and no buildings beyond."

He held his breath as Griscom pulled the momentum up another notch. This last effort palsied the engineer, his fingers relaxed, and he slipped again to the floor, nerveless but writhing.

"Keep her going--full speed for five hundred feet," he panted. "Then stop her."

"Yes," breathed Ralph quickly. "Stop her--how," he projected, knowing in a way, but wanting to be sure, for the sense of crisis was strong on him, and the present was no time to make mistakes. Griscom's directions came quick and clear, and Ralph obeyed every indication with promptness.

Ninety-nine with its deadly pilot of destruction plunged ahead. Ralph estimated distance. He threw himself upon the lever, and reversed.

The wheels shivered to a sliding halt. He ran back rapidly five hundred feet, slowed down, and half hung out of the window, white as a sheet and limp as a rag.

A glance towards the burning shops had shown the firemen back at their work; the powder-car menace removed. Ralph, too, saw little crowds rounding the shops, and making towards them.

Then he fixed his eyes on the lone-speeding powder car.

It had been thrown at full-tilt impetus, and drove away and ahead, a living firebrand, reached the end of the rusted rails, ran off the roadbed, tilted, careened, took a sliding header, and disappeared from view.

Even at the distance of a thousand feet Ralph could hear a prodigious splash. A cascade of water shot up, and then a steamy smoke, and then there lifted, torrent-like, house-high above the pit, a Vesuvius of water, dirt, splinters and twisted pieces of iron. A reverberating crash and the end had come!

Griscom struggled to his feet. On his face there was a grimace meant for a smile, and he chuckled:

"We made it!"

He managed with Ralph's help to get into the engineer's seat.

"Mr. Griscom," said Ralph, "you're in bad shape. We can't get back the way we came, but if you could walk as far as the offices we might find a doctor."

"That's so, kid," nodded the old engineer, a little wearily. "I've got to get this

junk and glassware out of my eyes if I run the 10.15 to-morrow."

Soon the advance stragglers of the curious crowd from the shops drew near. One little group was headed by a man of rather more imposing appearance than the section men in his train.

He was a big-faced individual who looked of uncertain temper, yet there were force and power in his bearing.

"Hello, there--that you, Griscom?" he sang out.

The engineer blinked his troubled eyes, and nodded curtly.

"It's what's left of me, Mr. Blake," he observed grimly.

Ralph caught the name and recognized the speaker--he was the master mechanic of the road.

"They're going to get the fire under control, I guess," continued Blake. "They wouldn't, though, if you hadn't got that car out of the way. Why, you're hurt, man!" exclaimed the official, really concerned as he caught a closer glimpse of the face of the engineer.

"Oh, a little scratch."

Ralph broke in. He hurriedly explained what had happened to the engineer's eyes, while the nervy Griscom tried to make little of it.

"Bring a truck out here," cried the master mechanic. "Why, man! you can't stand up! This is serious."

In about five minutes they had rolled a freight truck to the locomotive, and in ten more Griscom was under charge of one of the road surgeons, hastily summoned to a room in the yard office, where the sufferer was taken.

It took an hour to mend up the old veteran. It was lucky, the surgeon told him, that soot and putty had mixed with the glass in the explosion dose, or the patient would have been blinded for life.

Griscom could see quite comfortably when he was turned over to the master mechanic again, although his forehead was bandaged, and his cheeks dotted here and there with little criss-cross patches of sticking-plaster.

Ralph, waiting outside, had been forced to tell the story of the daring dash through the flames more than once to inquisitive railroad men. He quite obliterated himself in the recital.

The firemen had gained control of the flames, the exigency locomotives had all been sent back to the city. The master mechanic stood conversing with Griscom for a few moments after the latter left the surgeon's hands, and then approached Ralph with him. It was dusk now.

"We'll catch the 8.12, kid," announced Griscom. "That's him, Mr. Blake," he added, pointing Ralph out to his companion. "He did it, and I only helped him, and he's an all-around corker, I can tell you!"

Griscom slapped Ralph on the shoulder emphatically. The master mechanic

looked at the youth grimly, yet with a glance not lacking real interest.

"From the Junction?" he said.

"Yes, sir."

"What's the name?"

"Fairbanks--Ralph Fairbanks."

"Oh," said the master mechanic quickly, as if he recognized the name. "We'll remember you, Fairbanks. If I can do anything for you----"

"You can, sir." The words were out of Ralph's mouth before he intended it. "I want to learn railroading."

"Learn!" chuckled Griscom--"why! the way you worked that lever----"

"Which you needn't dwell on," interrupted the master mechanic, a harsh disciplinarian on principle. "He had no right in your locomotive, I suppose you know, and rules say you are liable for a lay off."

Griscom kept on chuckling.

"We'll forget that, though. Where do you want to start, Fairbanks?"

"Right at the bottom, sir," answered Ralph modestly.

"In the roundhouse?"

"Yes, sir."

The master mechanic drew a card from his pocket, wrote a few lines, and handed it to Ralph.

"Give that to Tim Forgan," he said simply.

To Ralph, just then, he was the greatest man in the world--he who could in ten words command the position that seemed to mean for him the entrance into the grandest realm of industry, ambition and opulence.

CHAPTER VII--AT THE ROUNDHOUSE

Ralph Fairbanks came out of the little cottage next morning after breakfast feeling bright as a dollar and happy as a lark.

He realized that a new epoch had begun in his young existence, and he stood fairly on the threshold of a fascinating experience.

Yesterday seemed like a variegated dream, and To-Day full of expectation, novelty and promise.

His mother's anxiety the evening previous had given way to pride and subdued affection, when he had appeared about ten o'clock after seeing the engineer home, and had told her in detail the story of the most eventful day of his life.

If Mrs. Fairbanks felt a natural disappointment in seeing Ralph forego the advantages of a finished education, she did not express it, for she knew that the best ambitions of his soul had been aroused, and that his loyal boyish nature had chosen a noble course.

Ralph went down to the depot and bought a Springfield morning paper. It contained a full account of the fire at the yards. It detailed the destruction of the powder car, and Griscom came in for full meed of praise. Ralph was not referred to, except as "the veteran engineer's heroic helper."

It did not take long, however, for Ralph to discover that word of mouth had run ahead of telegraphic haste.

He was hailed by a dozen acquaintances, including the depot master, the watchman, express messenger and others, who made him flush and thrill with pleasure as he guessed that old Griscom had managed to spread the real news wholesale.

"You're booked, sure!" declared More, giving his young favorite a hearty slap on the shoulder.

"Why, I imagine so myself," answered Ralph brightly, but thinking only of the master mechanic's card in his pocket.

"You're due for an interview with the president, you are," declared the enthusiastic More. "Why, you two saved the company half a million. And the pluck of it! Don't you be modest, kid. Hint for a good round reward and a soft-snap life position."

"All right," nodded Ralph gayly. "Only, I'll start at it where you told me yesterday."

"Eh?"

"Yes--at the roundhouse."

"Hold on, Fairbanks--circumstances alter cases----"

"Not in this instance. Good-bye. I expect to be in working togs before night, Mr. More."

Ralph went down the tracks, leaving the agent staring studiously after him.

He had often been inside the roundhouse, but with genuine interest stood looking about him for some minutes after stepping beyond the broad entrance of that dome-like structure.

Not much was doing at that especial hour of the morning. Three "dead" locomotives stood in their stalls, all furbished up for later employment.

A lame helper was going over one, just arrived, with an oiled rag.

In the little apartment known as the "dog house," a dozen men chatted, snoozed, or were playing checkers--firemen, engineers and brakemen, waiting for their run, or off duty and killing time.

Ralph finally made for a box-like compartment built in one section of the place. A man was sweeping it out.

"Can you tell me where I will find the foreman?" he asked.

"Oh, the boss?"

"Yes, sir--Mr. Forgan."

"You mean Tim. He's in the dog house, I guess. Was, last I saw of him."

Ralph went to the dog house. At a rough board nailed to the wall, and answering for a desk, a big-shouldered, gruff-looking man of about fifty was scanning the daily running sheet.

Two of the loungers, firemen, knew Ralph slightly, and nodded to him. He went up to one of them.

"Is that Mr. Forgan?" he inquired in a low tone.

"That's him," nodded the fireman--"and in his precious best temper this morning, too!"

Ralph approached the fierce-visaged master of his fate.

"Mr. Forgan," he said.

The foreman looked around at him, and scowled.

"Well?" he growled out.

"Could I see you for a moment," suggested Ralph, a trifle flustered at the rude reception.

"Take a good look. I'm here, ain't I?"

Some of the idle listeners chuckled at this, and Ralph felt a trifle embarrassed, and flushed up.

"Yes, sir, and so am I," he said quietly--"on business. I wish to apply for a position."

"Oh, you do?" retorted the big foreman, running his eye contemptuously over Ralph's neat dress. "Sort of floor-walker for visitors, or brushing up the engineers' plug hats?"

"I could do that, too," asserted Ralph, good-naturedly.

"Well, you won't do much of anything here," retorted the foreman, "for there's no job open, at present. If there was, we've had quite enough of kids."

Ralph wondered if this included Ike Slump. He had been surprised at not finding that individual on duty.

The foreman now unceremoniously turned his back on him. Ralph hesitated, then torched Forgan on the arm.

"Excuse me, sir," he said courteously, "but I was told to give you this."

Ralph extended the card given to him the evening previous by the master mechanic.

The foreman took it with a jerk, and read it with a frown. Ralph was somewhat astonished as he traced the effect upon him of the simple note, requesting, as he knew, that a place be made for him in the roundhouse.

The innocent little screed put the foreman in a violent ferment. His face grew angry and red, his throat throbbed, and his heavy jaw knotted up in a pugnacious way. He turned and glared with positive dislike and suspicion at Ralph, and the latter, quick to read faces, wondered why.

Then the foreman re-read the card, as if to gain time to get control of himself, and was so long silent that Ralph finally asked:

"Is it all right, sir?"

"Yes, it is!" snapped the foreman, turning on him like a mad bull. "I suppose Blake knows his business; I've been sent all the pikers on the line. Probably know what kind of material I want myself, though. Come again to-morrow."

"Ready for work?" asked Ralph, pressing his point.

"Yes," came the surly reply.

"What time, if you please, sir?"

"Seven."

"Thank you."

The foreman turned from him with an angry grunt, and Ralph started to leave.

One of the firemen he knew winked at him, another made an animated grimace at the surly boss. Ralph heard a third remark, in a low tone.

"What a liking he's taken to him! He'll have a fierce run for his money."

"Yes, it'll be a full course of sprouts. You won't have a path of flowers, kid."

"I shan't come here to raise flowers," answered Ralph quietly.

He trod the air as he left the roundhouse. The gruff, uncivil manner of the foreman had not daunted him a whit. He had met all kinds of men in his brief business experience, and he believed that honest, conscientious endeavor could not fail to win both success and good will in time.

Ralph went back to his friend More, at the express shed, and told his story.

"You're booked, sure enough," admitted the agent, though a little glumly. "I'd have struck higher."

"It suits me, Mr. More," declared Ralph. "And now, I want your good services of advice as to what I am expected to do, and what clothes I need."

Ralph left his friend, thoroughly posted as to his probable duties at the roundhouse. The agent advised him to purchase a cheap pair of jumpers, and wear old rough shoes and a thin pair of gloves the first day or two.

Ralph visited a dry-goods store, fitted himself out, and started for home.

He was absorbed in thinking and planning, and turning a corner thus engrossed almost ran into a pedestrian.

As he drew back and aside, a hand was suddenly thrust out and seized his arm in a vise-like grip.

"No, you don't!" sounded a strident voice. "I've got you at last, have I?"

In astonishment Ralph looked up, to recognize his self-announced captor. It was Gasper Farrington.

CHAPTER VIII--THE OLD FACTORY

Ralph pulled loose from the grasp of the crabbed old capitalist, fairly indignant at the sudden onslaught.

"Don't you run! don't you run!" cried Farrington, swinging his cane threateningly.

"And don't you dare to strike!" warned Ralph, with a glitter in his eye. "I'd like to know, sir, what right you have stopping me on the public street in this manner?"

"It will be a warrant matter, if you aint careful!" retorted Farrington.

"I can't imagine how."

"Oh, can't you?" gibed Farrington, his plain animosity for Ralph showing in his malicious old face. "Well, I'll show you."

"I shall be glad to have you do so."

"Do you see that building?"

Farrington pointed across the baseball grounds at the edge of which they stood, indicating the old unused factory.

A light broke on Ralph's mind.

"I own that building," announced Farrington, swelling up with importance--"it's my property."

"So I've heard."

"A window was broken there and you broke it!"

"I did," admitted Ralph.

"Oho! you shamefacedly acknowledge it, do you? Malicious mischief, young man--that's the phase of the law you're up against!"

"It was an accident," said Ralph--"pure and simple."

"Well, you'll stand for it."

"I intend to. I made a note of it in my mind at the time, Mr. Farrington, and if you had not said a word to me about it I should have done the right thing."

"What do you call the right thing?"

"Replacing the light of glass, of course," was Ralph's reply.

"Glad to see you've got some sense of decency about you. All right. It'll cost you just a dollar and twenty-five cents. Hand over the money, and I'll have my man fix it."

Ralph laughed outright.

"Hardly, Mr. Farrington," he said. "I can buy a pane of glass for thirty-five cents, and put it in for nothing. I will take this bundle home and attend to it at once."

Farrington looked mad and disappointed at being outwitted in his attempt to make three hundred per cent. However, if Ralph made good he could find no fault with the proposition. He mumbled darkly and Ralph passed on. Then a temptation he could not resist came to the boy, and turning he remarked:

"You'll be glad to know, perhaps, Mr. Farrington, that I have obtained steady work."

"Why should I be glad?"

"Because you advised it, and because it will enable us to pay you your interest promptly."

"Humph!" Then with an eager expression of face Farrington asked: "What are you going to work at?"

"Railroading."

"Very good--of course at the general offices at Springfield?"

"Of course not. I start in at the roundhouse here, to-morrow."

It was amazing how sour the magnate's face suddenly grew. Once more Ralph wondered why this man was so anxious to get them out of Stanley Junction.

Ralph proceeded homewards. It warmed his heart to see how thoroughly his mother entered into all his hopes and projects. She was soon busy in her quick, sure way, sewing on more strongly the buttons of jumper and overalls, and promised to have a neat light cap and working gloves ready for him by nightfall.

Ralph explained to her about the broken window, got a rule from his father's old tool chest, and went over to the vacant factory.

It was surrounded by a high fence, but at one place in seeking lost balls members of the Criterion Club had partially removed a gate. Ralph passed among the débris littering the yard, and went around the place until he found a door with

a broken lock.

He gained the inside and went up a rickety stairs. Swinging open a door at their top, Ralph found himself in the compartment with the broken window.

The air was close and unwholesome, despite the orifice the baseball had made. A broken skylight topped the center of the room, and a rain of the previous night had dripped down unimpeded and soaked the flooring.

"The ball must be here somewhere," mused Ralph. "There it is, but----"

As he spied the ball about the center of the room, Ralph discerned something else that sent a quick wave of concern across his nerves.

He stood silent and spellbound.

Upon the floor was a human being, so grimly stark and white, that death was instantly suggested to Ralph's mind.

His eyes, becoming accustomed to the half-veiled light filtered through the dirt-crusted panes of the skylight, made out that the figure on the floor was that of a boy.

As he riveted his glance, Ralph further discovered that it was the same boy he had met at the depot the morning previous--the mysterious "dead-head" under the trucks of the 10.15 train.

He lay upon the rough boards face upwards, his limbs stretched out naturally, but stiff and useless-looking.

The rain had soaked his garments, and he must have lain there at least since last midnight. Ralph was shocked and uncertain. Then an abrupt thought made him tremble and fear.

The ball lay by the boy's side. Right above one temple was the dark circular outline of a depression.

It flashed like lightning through Ralph's mind that the stranger had been struck by the ball.

The theory forced itself upon him that in hiding from the pursuing depot watchman, the stranger had sought refuge in the factory.

He might have quite naturally needed a rest after his long and torturing ride on truck and crossbar--he must have been in this room when Ralph had swung the bat that had sent the baseball hurtling through the window with the force of a cannon shot.

"It is true--it is true!" breathed Ralph in a ghastly whisper, as the full consequence of his innocent act burst upon his mind.

He had to hold to a post to support himself, swaying there and looking down at the cold, mute face, sick at heart, and his brain clouded with dread.

It must have been a full five minutes before he pulled himself together, and tried to divest himself of the unnatural horror that palsied his energies.

He finally braced his nerves, and, advancing, knelt beside the prostrate boy.

Ralph placed his trembling hand inside the open coat, and let it rest over the heart. His own throbbed loud and strong with hope and relief, as under his finger tips there was a faint, faint fluttering.

"He is alive--thank heaven for that!" cried Ralph fervently.

He ran to the window. Through the broken pane he could view the baseball grounds and the clubhouse beyond.

Will Cheever was sitting outside of the house, and at a little distance another member of the Criterions was exercising with a pair of Indian clubs.

Ralph tried to lift the lower sash, but it would not budge.

He ripped out of place the loose side piece, and removed the sash complete.

"Will--boys!" he shouted loudly, "come--come quick!"

CHAPTER IX--AN UNEXPECTED GUEST

Ralph soon drew the attention of his friends, and in a few minutes Will Cheever and his companion had made their way into the old factory.

Both looked startled as they entered the room, and serious and anxious as Ralph hurriedly told of his discovery and theory.

"It looks as if you were right, Ralph," said Will as he looked closely at the silent form on the floor.

"Poor fellow!" commented Will's companion. "He must have been lying here all alone--all through that storm, too---since yesterday afternoon."

"He isn't dead," announced Will, but still in an awed tone. "What are you going to do, Ralph?"

"We must get him out of here," answered Ralph. "If one of you could bring the cot over from the clubhouse, we will carry him there."

Will sped away on the mission indicated. When he returned, they prepared to use the cot as a stretcher. The strange boy moved and moaned slightly as they lifted him up, but did not open his eyes, and lay perfectly motionless as they carefully carried him down the stairs, across the ballfield, and into the clubhouse.

There was a telephone there. Ralph hurriedly called up a young physician, very friendly with the boys, and whose services they occasionally required.

He arrived in the course of the next fifteen minutes. He expressed surprise at the wet and draggled condition of his patient, felt his pulse, examined his heart, and sat back with his brows knitted in thoughtfulness.

"Who is he?" inquired the doctor.

"I don't know," answered Ralph. "He is a stranger to Stanley Junction. From his clothes, I should judge he is some poor fellow from the country districts, who has seen hard work," and Ralph told about the first sensational appearance of the stranger at the depot the morning before, and the details of his accidental discovery an hour previous in the old factory.

"Your theory is probably correct, Fairbanks," said the young physician gravely. "That blow on the head is undoubtedly the cause of his present condition, and that baseball undoubtedly struck him down. Lying neglected and insensible for twenty-four hours, and exposed to the storm, has not helped things any."

"But--is his condition dangerous?" inquired Ralph in a fluttering tone.

"It is decidedly serious," answered the doctor. "There appears to be a suspension of nerve activity, and I would say concussion of the brain. The case puzzles me, however, for the general functions are normal."

"Can't you do something to revive him?" inquired Will.

"I shall try, but I fear returning sensibility will show serious damage to the brain," said the doctor.

He opened his pocket medicine case, and selecting a little phial, prepared a few drops of its contents with water, and hypodermically injected this into the patient's arm.

In a few minutes the watchers observed a warm, healthy flush spread over the white face and limp hands of the recumbent boy. His muscles twitched. He moved, sighed, and became inert again, but seemed now rather in a deep, natural sleep than in a comatose condition.

The doctor watched his patient silently, seemingly satisfied with the effects of his ministrations.

After a while he took up another phial, held back one eyelid of the sleeper with forefinger and thumb, and let a few drops enter the eye of the sleeper.

The patient shot up one hand as if a hot cinder had struck his eyeball. He rubbed the afflicted optic, gasped, squirmed, and came half-upright en one arm. Both eyes opened, one blinking as though smarting with pain.

He wavered so weakly that Ralph braced an arm behind to support him.

"Steady now!" said the doctor, touching his patient with a prodding finger to attract his attention. "Who are you, my friend?"

The boy stared blankly at him as he caught the sound of his voice, and then

at the three boys. He did not smile, and there was a peculiarly vacant expression on his face.

Then he moved his lips as if his throat was parched and stiff, and said huskily:

"Hungry."

The doctor shrugged his shoulders, puzzled and amused. Ralph himself half-smiled. The demand was so distinctively human it cheered him.

The patient kept looking around as if expecting food to be brought to him. The young physician studied him silently. Then he projected half a dozen quick, sharp questions. His patient did not even appear to hear him. He looked reproachfully about him, and again spoke:

"Fried perch would be pretty good!"

"He must be about half-starved, poor fellow!" observed Will. "Doctor, he acts all right, only desperately hungry. Maybe a good square meal will fix him out all right?"

The doctor moved towards the door, and beckoned Ralph there.

"Fairbanks," he said, "this is a serious matter--no, no, I don't mean the fact that the baseball did the damage," he explained hurriedly, as he saw Ralph's face grow pale and troubled. "That was an accident, and something you could not foresee. I mean that this poor fellow is, for the present at least, helpless as a child."

"Doctor," quavered Ralph, "you don't mean his mind is gone."

"I fear it is."

"Oh, don't say that! don't say that!" pleaded Ralph, falling against the door post and covering his face with his hands.

He was genuinely distressed. All the brightness of his good luck and prospects seemed dashed out. He could not divest his mind of a certain responsibility for the condition of the poor fellow on the cot, whose usefulness in life had been cut short by an accidental "lost ball."

"Don't be overcome--it isn't like you, Fairbanks," chided the doctor gently. "I know you feel badly--we all do. Let us get at the practical end of this business without delay. We had better get the patient removed to the hospital, first thing."

"No!" interrupted Ralph quickly, "not that, doctor--that is, anyway not yet."

"He needs skillful attention."

"He's needing some hash just now!" put in Will Cheever, approaching, his face, despite himself, on a grin. "Hear him!"

The stranger was certainly sticking to his point. "Hash with lots of onions in it!" they heard him call out.

"Will it hurt him to eat, doctor?" inquired Ralph.

"Not a bit of it. In fact, except to feed him and watch, I don't see that he needs

anything. You can't splint a brain shock as you can a broken finger, or poultice a skull depression as you would a bruise. There's simply something mental gone out of the boy's life that science cannot put in again. There is this hope, though: that when the physical shock has fully passed, something may develop for the better."

"You mean to-day, to-morrow----"

"Oh, no--weeks, maybe months."

Ralph looked disheartened, but the next moment his face took upon it a look of resolution always adopted when he fully made up his mind to anything.

"Very well," he said, "he must be taken to our house."

With the doctor Ralph was a rare favorite, and his face showed that he read and appreciated the kindly spirit that prompted the young railroader's action. He placed his hand in a friendly way on his shoulder.

"Fairbanks," he said, "you're a good kind, and do credit to yourself, but I fear you are in no shape to take such a burden on your young shoulders."

"It is my burden," said Ralph firmly, "whose else's? Why, doctor! if I let that poor fellow go to the hospital, among utter strangers, handed down the line you don't know where--poorhouse, asylum, and pauper's grave maybe, it would haunt me! No, I feel I am responsible for his condition, and I intend to take care of him, at least until something better for him turns up. Help me, boys."

"I'll drop in to see him again, at your house," said the doctor. "I don't think he will make you any trouble in the way of violence, or that, but you had better keep a constant eye on him."

Ralph thought a good deal on the way to the cottage. He felt that he was doing the right thing, and knew that his mother would not demur to the arrangements he had formulated.

Mrs. Fairbanks not only did not demur, but when she was made aware of the particulars, sustained Ralph in his resolution.

"Poor fellow!" she said sympathetically. "The first thing he needs is a warm bath, and we might find some dry clothes for him, Ralph."

The widow bustled about to do her share in making the unexpected guest comfortable. Will Cheever and his companion felt in duty bound to lend a helping hand to Ralph.

They had put the cot in the middle of the kitchen, and quiet now, but with wide-open eyes, its occupant watched them as they hurriedly got out a tub and put some water to heat on the cook stove.

"Swim," said the stranger, only once, and was content thereafter to watch operations silently.

"He's got dandy muscles--built like a giant!" commented Will, as half an hour later they carried the boy into the neat, cool sitting room, and lodged him among cushions in an easy-chair.

Meantime, Mrs. Fairbanks had not been idle. She had prepared an appetizing lunch. The stranger looked supremely happy as Ralph appeared with a tray of viands. He ate with the zest of a growing, healthy boy, and when he had ended sank back among the cushions and fell into a calm, profound sleep.

"Ralph Fairbanks, you're a brick!" said Will. "He don't look much like the half-drowned, half-starved rat he was when you picked him up."

"Knocked him down, you mean!" said Ralph, with a sigh. "Well, mother, we'll do what we can for him."

"We will do for him just what I pray some one might do for my boy, should such misfortune ever become his lot," said the widow tremulously. "He looks like a hard-working, honest boy, I only hope he may come out of his daze in time. If not, we will do our duty--what we might think a burden may be a blessing in disguise."

"You're always 'casting bread on the waters,' Mrs. Fairbanks!" declared Will, in his crisp, offhand way.

To return after many days--light-headed, light-hearted Will Cheever! There are incidents in every boy's life which are the connecting links with all the unknown future, and for Ralph Fairbanks, although he little dreamed it, this was one of them.

CHAPTER X--THE MYSTERIOUS LETTER

Will and his friend offered to attend to the broken window in the old factory for Ralph, and the latter was glad to accept the tendered service.

He gave them the price of glass and putty, and a blunt case knife, told them they would find his rule under the window, and as they departed felt assured they would attend to the matter with promptness and dispatch.

Ralph had something on his mind that he felt he could best carry out alone, and after their departure he left his mother quietly sewing in her rocking chair to watch their placidly slumbering guest.

"The boy is a stranger here, of course," Ralph ruminated. "Where did he come from? I hope I will find something among his belongings that will tell."

They were poor belongings, and now hung across a clothes line in the back yard, drying in the warm sunshine.

The coat and trousers were of coarse material, clumsily patched here and there as if by a novice, and Ralph decided did not bear that certain unmistakable trace that tells of home or motherly care.

In the trousers pocket Ralph found a coil of string, a blunt bladed pocket knife, and a hunk of linen thread with a couple of needles stuck in it--this was all.

The coat contained not a single clew as to the identity of the stranger, not a hint of his regular place of residence, whence he had come or whither he was going.

It held but one object--a letter which the boy when pursued by the depot guardians had shown to Ralph the morning previous, and which at that time with considerable astonishment Ralph had observed bore the superscription: "Mr. John Fairbanks."

He had thought of the letter and wondered at its existence, the possible sender, the singular messenger, a score of times since he had attempted to take it from the dead-head passenger of the 10.15.

Now he held it in his grasp, but Ralph handled it gingerly. The envelope was soaking wet, just as was the coat and the pocket he had taken it from. As he removed it from its resting place he observed that the poor ink of the superscription had run, and the letters of the address were faded and fast disappearing.

To open it with any hope of removing its contents intact in its present condition was clearly impossible. Ralph held it carefully against the sunlight. Its envelope was thin, and he saw dark patches and blurs inside, indicating that the writing there had run also.

"I had better let it dry before I attempt to open it," decided Ralph, and he placed it on a smooth board near the well in the full focus of the bright sunshine.

A good deal hinged on that letter, he told himself. It would at all events settle the identity of his dead father's correspondent, again it would divulge who it was that had sent the letter and the messenger, and thus the unfortunate's friends could be found. It would take a little time to dry out the soggy envelope, and Ralph paced about the garden paths, whistling softly to himself and thinking hard over the queer happenings of the past twenty-four hours.

As he passed the window of the little sitting room, he tiptoed the gravel path up to it and glanced in.

His mother still sat in the rocker, but she had fallen into a slight doze, and her sewing lay idle in her lap. Ralph, transferring his gaze to the armchair where they had so comfortably bestowed the invalid, fairly started with astonishment.

"Why, he isn't there!" breathed Ralph in some alarm, and ran around to the entrance by the kitchen door.

At its threshold Ralph paused, enchained by the unexpected picture there disclosed to his view.

The injured boy stood at the sink. He had found and tied about his waist a work apron belonging to Mrs. Fairbanks. Before him was the dishpan half-full of water, and he had washed and wiped neatly and quickly the dishes from the tray.

He arranged the various articles in their respective drawers and shelves, stood back viewing them with satisfaction, removed the apron, carefully hung it up, and went to the open back door leading into the wood shed.

Ralph's alarm for fear that his guest had wandered off or might do himself a mischief, gave place to pleased interest.

It looked as if the strange boy had been used to some methodical features of domestic life, and habit was fitting him readily and comfortably into the groove in which he found himself.

Ralph decided that he would not startle or disturb the stranger, but would watch to see what he did next.

The boy glanced towards the wood box behind the cook stove. In the hurry of the past twenty-four hours Ralph had not found time to keep it as well filled as usual.

His guest evidently observed this, went into the wood shed, seated himself on the chopping log, and seizing the short handled ax there, began chopping the sawed lengths piled near at hand with a pleased, hearty good will.

Mrs. Fairbanks, disturbed by the sound of chopping, had awakened, and with some trepidation came hurrying from the sitting room, anxiously seeking to learn what had become of their guest.

Ralph motioned her to silence, his finger on his lip, and pointed significantly through the open rear doorway.

A pathetic sympathy crossed the widow's face and the tears came into her eyes. Ralph left her to keep an unobtrusive watch on their guest, and returning to the well, found the envelope he had left there pretty well dried out.

He carefully removed the envelope, and placed it in his pocket. Then he as carefully unfolded the sheet within.

An expression of dismay crossed his face. The inside screed had not been written in ink, but with a soft purple lead pencil. This the rain had affected even more than it had the envelope in which it had been enclosed.

At first sight the missive was an indecipherable blur, but scanning it more closely, Ralph gained some faint hope that he might make out at least a part of its contents.

He had a magnifying glass in his workroom in the attic, and he went there

for it. For nearly an hour Ralph pored over the sheet of paper which he held in his hand.

His face was a study as he came downstairs again, and sought his mother.

She sat near the doorway between the kitchen and the sitting room, where she could keep sight of their guest.

The invalid was seated on the door step of the wood shed shelling a pan of peas, as happy and contented a mortal as one would see in a day's journey.

"He is a good boy," said the widow softly to Ralph, "and winsome with his gentle, easy ways. He seems to delight in occupation. What is it, Ralph?" she added, as she noted the serious, preoccupied look on her son's face.

"It is about the letter, mother," explained Ralph. "I told you partly about it. It was certainly directed to father, and some one employed or sent this boy to deliver it."

"Who was it, Ralph?" inquired Mrs. Fairbanks.

"That I can not tell."

"Was it not signed?"

"It was once, but the upper fold and the lower fold of the sheet are a perfect blur. I have been able to make out a few words here and there in the center portion, but they tell nothing coherently."

Mrs. Fairbanks looked disappointed.

"That is unfortunate, Ralph," she said. "I hoped it would give some token of this boy's home or friends. But probably, when he does not return, and no answer comes to that letter, the writer will send another letter by mail."

"The boy may have been only incidentally employed to deliver it," suggested Ralph, "and not particularly known to the sender at all."

"I can not imagine who would be writing to your dead father," said Mrs. Fairbanks thoughtfully. "It can scarcely be of much importance."

"Mother," said Ralph, with an emphasis that impressed the widow, "I am satisfied this letter was of unusual importance--so much so that a special messenger was employed, and that is what puzzles me. A line in it was plainly 'your railroad bonds,' another as plainly refers to 'the mortgage,' the last word heads like 'Farewell,' and there is something that looks very much like: 'to get even with that old schemer, Gasper Farrington.'"

The widow started violently.

"Why, Ralph!" she exclaimed.

"Yes, mother. We may never know more than this. It is all a strange proceeding, but if that poor fellow out yonder could tell all he knows, I believe it would surprise and enlighten us very much, and in a way greatly for our benefit."

"Then we must wait with patience, and hope with courage," said Mrs. Fairbanks calmly.

Ralph felt all that he said. He could not get the letter out of his mind that evening.

They fitted up a little spare room off the dining room for their guest. He went quietly to bed when they led him there, after enjoying a good, supper, never speaking a word, never smiling, but with a pleased nod betokening that he appreciated every little kindness they showed him.

The next morning Ralph Fairbanks went to work at the roundhouse.

CHAPTER XI--ON DUTY

Ralph cut across lots on his way to the roundhouse. He was not one whit ashamed to be seen wearing a working cap and carrying a dinner pail and the bundle under his arm, but cap, pail and overalls were distressingly new and conspicuous, and he was something like a boy in his first Sunday suit and wondering if it fitted right, and how the public took it.

It was too early to meet any of his school friends, but crossing a street to take the tracks he was hailed volubly.

Ralph did not halt. His challenger was Grif Farrington, his arm linked in that of a chum whom Ralph did not know, both smoking cigarettes, and both showing the rollicking mood of young would-be sports who wished it to be believed they had been making a night of it, and thinking it smart.

"What's the uniform, Fairbanks?" cried Grif, affecting a critical stare--"going fishing? Is that a bait box?"

"Not a bit of it. It's my dinner pail, and I'm going to work, at the roundhouse."

"Chump!"

"Oh, I guess not."

"Double-distilled! Make more money going on the circuit with the club. Personally guarantee you ten dollars a week. Got scads of money, me and the old man. Sorry," commented Grif in a solemn manner, as Ralph continued on his way unheeding. "Poor, but knows how to bat. Pity to see a fellow go wrong that way, eh?" he asked his companion.

Ralph laughed to himself, and braced up proudly. Between idle, dissolute Grif Farrington and himself he could see no room for comparison.

Some sleepy loungers were in the dog house, and a fireman was running his engine to its stall. Ralph went over to the lame helper he had seen the day previous.

"I'm to begin work here to-day, I was told," he said. "Can you start me in?"

"I'm not the boss."

"I know that, but couldn't you show me the ropes before the others come?"

"Why, there's an empty locker for your traps," said the man. "When the foreman comes, he'll tell you what your duties are."

"No harm putting in the time usefully, I suppose?" insinuated Ralph.

"I suppose not," answered the taciturn helper. He seemed a sickly, spiritless creature, whom misfortune or a naturally crabbed temper had warped clear out of gear.

Ralph stowed his dinner pail in the locker, slipped on overalls and jumper and an old pair of shoes, and placed the fingerless gloves he had prepared in a convenient pocket.

The lame helper had disappeared. Ralph noticed that the place needed sweeping. He went to where the brooms stood, selected one, and started in at his voluntary task.

He felt he was doing something to improve the looks of things, and worked with a will. He had made the greasy boards look quite spick and smooth, and was whistling cheerily at his work, when a gruff growl caused him to look up.

The foreman, Tim Forgan, confronted him with a lowering, suspicious brow.

"Who told you to do that?" he demanded sharply.

"Why, nobody," answered Ralph. "I like to keep busy, that's all. No harm, I hope?"

"Yes, there is!" snapped Forgan. Ralph surprisedly wondered why this man seemed determined to be at odds with him. He had not fallen in with very cheerful or elevating company. Forgan continued to regard him with an evil eye.

"See here," he said roughly, "I'll have discipline here, and I'll be boss. I'll give you your duties, and if you step over the line, get out. This isn't a playroom, as you'll probably find out before you've been here long."

Ralph thought it best to maintain silence.

"You take that box and can yonder, and go to the supply and oil sheds and get some waste and grease. Slump will be here soon, take your orders from him for to-day."

Ralph bowed politely and understandingly.

"I'll tell you another thing," went on Forgan harshly. "Don't you get to knowing too much, or talking about it. I'll have no spying around my affairs."

Ralph was astonished. He tried to catch the keynote of the foreman's plaint. Suspicion seemed the incentive of his anger, and yet Ralph could trace no reason

for it.

An open doorway led from one side of the roundhouse. Ralph picked up a heavy sheet-iron pail and a tin box with a handle. Just then the helper came into view.

"Where do I go for oil and waste?" asked Ralph.

The helper surlily pointed through the doorway. Ralph found himself in a bricked-in passage, slippery with oil, and leading to a narrow yard. On one side was a row of sheds, whose interior comprised bins for boxes filled with all kinds of metal fittings. On the other side were like sheds, full of cans, pails and barrels. From here some men were conveying barrow loads of pails and cans filled with oil and grease, and Ralph went to an open door.

Inside was a grimy, greasy fellow marking something on a card tacked to the wall. Ralph told him who he was, got both receptacles filled, and went back to the roundhouse.

He sat down on a bench and watched a fireman go through the finishing touches on his engine which put it "to sleep." The last whistle sounded, and in through the doorway came Ike Slump.

The latter was a wiry, elfish fellow, usually very volatile and active. On this especial morning, however, he looked ugly, depressed and wicked. He went over to his locker, threw in his dinner pail, put on a pair of overalls, and for the first time observed Ralph.

"Hello!" he ejaculated, taking a step backward, hunching his shoulders, showing his teeth, and lurching forward much with the pose of a prize fighter descending on an easy victim.

"Good-morning, Ike," said Ralph pleasantly.

Ike Slump indulged in a vicious snarl.

"Morning nothing!" he snapped. "What you doing here?"

"I'm going to work here."

"Who says so?"

"The foreman."

"When?"

"Yesterday, and ten minutes ago. In fact, I am waiting to begin under your directions, as he ordered."

"Oh, you are!" muttered Ike darkly, and in hissing long-drawn-out accents. "That's your lay, is it? Well, say, do you see those?"

Ike glanced keenly about him. Then advancing, he strutted up to Ralph, bunched one set of coarse, dirty knuckles, and rested them squarely on Ralph's nose.

Ralph did not budge for a second or two. When he did, it was with infinite unconcern and the remark:

"Yes, I see them, and a little soap and water wouldn't hurt them any."

"Say! do you want to insult me? say! are you spoiling for a fight? say----"

"Keep a little farther away, please," suggested Ralph, putting out one of those superbly-rounded, magnificently-formed arms of his, which sent the bullying Ike back, stiff and helpless as if he was at the end of an iron rod.

"Say----" Ike began on his war dance again. "This is too much!" Then he subsided as he noticed the foreman cross the roundhouse. "No chance now, but to-night, after work, we'll settle this!"

"Just as you like, Ike," assented Ralph accommodatingly--"only, drop it long enough just now to start me in at my duties, or we'll both have Mr. Forgan in our hair."

Ike unclinched his fists, but he continued to growl and grumble to himself.

"A nice sneak you are!" Ralph made out. "Thought you'd be smart! Gave away my tip, didn't you?"

"See here, Ike, what do you mean?"

"I mean I told you I was going to leave, and you promised to hang around and come on deck when I'd had my pay."

"The way things turned out," said Ralph, "there was no occasion for that."

"You bet there wasn't! You just sneaked the word to Forgan double-quick, he told the old man, and I got a walloping, locked up on bread and water yesterday, and all my plans scattered about leaving. You bet I'll cut the job just the same, though!" declared Ike, with a vicious snap of his jaws. "Only, you gave me away, and I'm going to pay you off for it."

"Ike, you are very much mistaken."

"Yah!"

"I never mentioned what you told me to any one."

"Cut it out! We'll settle that to-night. Now you get to work."

Ralph at last understood the situation, but he saw the futility of attempting to convince his obstinate companion of his error.

Besides, the foreman in the distance was watching him from the corner of one eye, and Ike thought it best to apply himself to business.

"You just watch me for an hour or two," he bolted out grudgingly.

Ralph did not spend a happy forenoon. Ike was sullen, grumpy and savage.

He made his helper hold the grease pail when it was unnecessary, till Ralph's arms were stiff, dropping splotches of oil on his shoes. He let the exhaust deluge him, as if by accident, and refused to engage in any general conversation, nursing his wrath the meantime.

He knew how to clean up an engine, although, Ralph divined, in the most slipshod and easiest way that would pass inspection. Ralph was learning something, however, and was patient under the slights Ike put upon him from time to

time.

About eleven o'clock there was a lull in active work.

Mr. Ike Slump lounged on the bench, indulging in a smoke and trying to look important and dangerous, both at once. Then, as if casually, he began kneading a fat, juicy ball of waste and grease, poked it under the bench, and said to Ralph:

"There's two switch engines coming in. You can take one of them, and see if you know how to handle it."

"I'll try," announced Ralph.

"When you come to the bell, give her a good, hard rubbing. They'll give you some sand at the supply shed."

"Sand?" repeated Ralph vaguely.

"Sure. Dump it in with the grease in the little pail, and don't fail to slap it on thick and plenty."

Ralph said nothing. He started for the passageway with more thoughts than one in his mind. As he shot a quick glance back of him, he observed Ike leap from the bench, poke out the grease ball, palm it, and disappear from his range of vision.

Ralph went to the supply shed and got a can full of sand. Then he started back the way he had come.

As he did so, he observed the foreman turn into the passage in front of him.

Ralph was due to pass by him, for the foreman was pursuing his way at a leisurely gait, but Ralph did nothing of the sort.

He guessed considerable and anticipated more from the recent suspicious movements of his temporary master, and smiled slightly, allowing the foreman to precede him.

As Tim Forgan stepped through the doorway leading into the roundhouse, that happened which Ralph Fairbanks had foreseen.

His enemy, lying in wait there to "christen" his new work suit as he had threatened, let drive, never doubting but that the approaching footsteps were those of Ralph.

With a dripping swush the ball of waste and grease cut through the air and took the roundhouse foreman squarely in the face.

CHAPTER XII--IKE SLUMP'S REVENGE

The roundhouse foreman staggered back with a gasp.

The oil splattered over his face, neck and chest, the waste separated and dropped down inside his vest.

Then, astonished, Forgan dashed the blinding grease from his eyes, ran forward, took a stare in every direction, and doubled his pace with a roar like a maddened bull.

"You imp of Satan!" he yelled.

He had detected Ike Slump, unmistakably the culprit. With agile springs, fairly terrified at his mistake, Ike had taken to flight.

In his haste he tripped over a rail. His pursuer pounced down on him before he could get up, snatched him up with one hand by the collar, grabbed half a loose box cover with another, dragged him into the little office, banged the door shut with his foot, and the work of retribution began.

The men in the dog house had been attracted by the turmoil. Now they stood gazing at the closed office door.

A grin ran the rounds, as from within escaped sounds unmistakably connected with the box cover, mingled with the frantic yells of Ike Slump.

"That kid's been spoiling for just this for some time," observed a gray-bearded engineer.

"Has he?" echoed an extra--"well, just! He's been the bane of Forgan's life ever since he came here. The boss had to keep him because Ike's father is a crony, but he's getting real enjoyment for the privilege!"

There was nothing malicious in Ralph's nature, but he felt that Ike Slump deserved a lesson. Ralph proceeded calmly on his way as though nothing had happened, carried his can of sand over to the bench, mixed it well in one of the small oil pails, took up the other and some waste, and went over to one of the two switch engines that had just come in.

They stood on adjacent tracks, not yet run to stall. Ralph began his first task as a real wiper. He had watched Ike carefully, and it was no trick at all to follow in his mechanical groove, and much improve his system, besides.

Ralph was busy on the bell as the door of foreman's office was thrust open.

Ike Slump was as quickly thrust out. He was blubbering, limp, and smarting with pain.

Forgan was red-faced and panting from his exertions.

"Now then," he said, "you get to work, or get out and home to your father, just as you like."

"He'll kill me if I do!" came from Ike.

"He ought to. Hustle there, now!"

Ike went to the bench, picked up the grease pail, and climbed to the cabin of the other switch engine.

He cast an angry glance at Ralph.

"Played it smart, didn't you!" he snarled.

"You shouldn't complain," answered Ralph calmly.

"Wait till to-night!"

"I'm waiting," tranquilly rejoined Ralph, poising back to view about as fine a shimmer to the bell he was working on as oil and waste and elbow grease could produce.

Meantime, Ike had blindly, savagely slapped a coat of grease on the bell opposite.

A yell went up from his wrathful lips as he applied the waste.

He nearly had a fit and if he could have found a loose missile he would doubtless have thrown it at Ralph.

"Confound you!" he hissed. "Oh, I'll get you yet!"

"I'm here," said Ralph. "What's up. You said sand was good for the bell. Is it?"

"Say, you wait! oh, say, you wait!" foamed Ike.

Both worked their way simultaneously into the cabs, the upper wiping done. Ralph watched his fellow-worker. The locomotives had been dumped, but there was still enough steam to run them to bed.

"Soon as I run her in," announced Ike malevolently across the two-foot space between the engines, "I'm going to jump my job."

Ralph said nothing. Ike had put his hand on the lever, intending evidently to slow back the locomotive to its stall. Ralph was expected to do the same with the other engine.

"But I'll be laying for you at quitting time, and with the bunch, don't you forget it!" supplemented Ike.

Ralph gave the lever a touch, the wheels started, but instantly he shut off

steam.

Glancing sideways and out through the open front of the roundhouse, his eyes met a sight that would have paralyzed some people, but which acted on his impetuous nature like a shock of electricity.

With one leap he cleared the cab, in two springs he had reached the doorway. The startled Ike Slump saw him disappear behind the locomotive. His bead-like eyes glowed.

Now was his chance. Leaning over between the two locomotives, he touched the lever Ralph had just shut off. The locomotive started towards its stall.

Directing his own forward, it went on its diverging course at routine slow speed.

This cleared the view from doghouse and office. At that moment the foreman's strident tones belched out:

"Stop her! Where's the wiper?"

All eyes saw that the second locomotive was not manned. Some had witnessed Ralph's sensational disappearance.

Three or four made a run for the unguided locomotive. The foremost of the group sprang into the cab just as the tender struck the circular outer wall of the roundhouse.

He halted the engine, but not until the tender had smashed a hole out to daylight, taking one big window upon its back, and buried the rails under half a ton of brick and mortar.

Ike Slump descended from his locomotive serene as summer skies, as Forgan rushed up to the scene.

"Where's the smart-Aleck that did that!" roared the foreman.

He was fairly distracted with the accumulating disturbances of the hour.

"Dunno. Got scared at hearing the steam hiss, I guess, and run for it," said Ike.

Tim Forgan paced up and down the planks, a smoldering volcano of wrath.

"There he is now," piped Ike, hugging himself with delight, as he considered that he had turned the tables on Ralph.

The foreman dashed towards the entrance of the roundhouse. Sure enough, Ralph had come into view.

Half a dozen persons were straggling after him, and some unusual commotion was evidently rife among them, but the infuriated roundhouse foreman at the moment had eyes only for the object of his rage.

Ralph's face was as white as chalk, he was out of breath, one arm of his jacket was torn away, and from the elbow to the finger tips there was a long, bleeding scratch.

The foreman ran up to him, and almost jerked him off his feet as he caught him by the arm.

"You young blunderer!" he roared--"look at your work! Five hundred dollars damage!"

Ralph seemed in an uncomprehending daze and failed to take in the wrathful sweep of Forgan's arm towards the dismantled wall.

"I'll give you the same dose I gave that young imp, Slump!" shouted Forgan, losing all control of himself.

He began to drag Ralph towards the office. The latter had acted as if about to faint! Now his senses seemed to arouse abruptly.

Ralph braced back. His eyes swept the crowd about him. He caught sight of Ike Slump's gloating face, and beyond him the wrecked wall.

"Wait!" he said faintly, and then with more firmness of tone: "Stop! what do you accuse me of?"

"Accuse you of?" roared the foreman. "Hear him! I suppose you pretend not to see your work. Look at that wall, look at that engine----"

"I didn't do it," declared Ralph positively, catching on for the first time.

"Oh, I won't listen to such rot!" fumed Forgan. "You get out good and quick, but I'll give you something to remember it by before you do."

"Stop!" again spoke Ralph, and this time it was a command. "You are accusing me of something I know nothing about, Mr. Forgan. Let go my arm."

"Why, you impudent young jackanapes! I'll lick the daylight out of you now, just to drive some truth into you!"

"Don't you dare to touch me!" cried Ralph. He was fully aroused now. The natural glitter had returned to his eye, and with a quick move he jerked free from the grasp of the foreman, powerful as it was. "I allow no man to punish me for what I did not do, and this is a place where we stand as man to man."

The foreman had been surprised at Ralph's exhibition of genuine strength, but that manifestation had only served to increase his rage.

In positive fury he posed for a savage spring at Ralph. The latter put both hands on the defensive. His lips were firmly compressed. He did not wish to imperil his position by fighting with a superior, but he was determined to stand on his rights.

At that moment, in advance of the pressing crowd outside, big Denny Sloan, the yard watchman, came into view.

"Drop that, Tim Forgan!" he ordered quickly. "Don't touch that boy, or you'll be sorry for it to your dying day!"

CHAPTER XIII--MAKING HIS WAY

Big Denny confronted the roundhouse foreman, an obstructing block in his path. He was one of the heaviest men in the service, built like an ox, and immensely good-natured.

Just now, however, he was also immensely excited and serious, and the crowd stared at him curiously, and at Forgan in an astonished way.

"This is none of your business. Don't you interfere, don't you try to shield that miserable blunderer!" shouted the foreman.

"Hold on, Tim," advised the watchman, putting out his big arm, and abruptly checking Forgan in a forward dash.

"Do you know what he's done!" howled Forgan.

"Do you?"

"Do I----"

"I guess you don't, Tim," said Big Denny quietly. "Just you cool down. This way, boys," called the watchman into the crowd at his heels. "Keep cool, Tim--there's no harm done, but there might have been if Fairbanks here wasn't quicker than lightning, and a brave young hero, besides!"

The crowd parted, a switchman came into view. He carried in his arms, white and limp, a little girl about ten years of age.

Hanging by the neck ribbon was her pretty summer hat, crushed and cut squarely in two. One temple was somewhat disfigured, and her dress was soiled with roadbed dust and grime.

Tim Forgan looked once and his jaws dropped. He shuddered as if some one had dealt him a blow, and staggered where he stood, his face turning to a sickly gray.

"Nora!" he gasped--"my little Nora! Denny--boys! she is hurt--dead!"

"Neither," answered the big watchman promptly, placing a soothing hand on the foreman's quivering arm. "Steady, old man, now!"

"Give her to me!" shouted Forgan, in a frenzy. "Nora, my little Nora! What has happened? what has happened?"

The big fellow had one idol, one warm corner in his heart--his little grandchild.

His rugged brow corrugated, and he was frantic beyond all reason as he covered the still white face with kisses, nestling the motionless child in his arms tenderly.

"Take her into the office," directed Denny. "Give her air, lads--and get some cold water, some of you."

He blocked the doorway with his bulky frame as the foreman and his charge passed through, admitting a moment later a switchman with a can of water, and two of the older engineers at his heels.

Then he closed the door, and looked around for Ralph. The latter had sunk to a bench, still pale and faint-looking. The lame helper was ransacking his locker. Coming thence with some clean waste and a bottle of liniment, he snatched up a pail, went outside, got some warm water from a locomotive, and approached Ralph.

Ralph regarded him in some wonder, but made no demur as the strange, silent fellow began to wash and dress his injured arm with a touch soft and careful as that of a woman.

Big Denny continued to stand on guard at the closed door of the foreman's little office.

The crowd from the outside was exchanging information with the roundhouse throng, trying to patch mutual disclosures together into some coherency.

Ike Slump's look of malevolent gratification had faded away. He began to surmise that Ralph had a purpose in so summarily deserting his post, and that the anticipated "turning of the tables" was not destined to materialize.

"What's the rights of things, Denny?" asked one of the engineers. "That was little Nora Forgan, wasn't it!"

"Sure--and you know what she is to gruff old Tim, apple of his eye. If anything happened to her, I believe he'd go mad."

"He's pretty near there now, with his tantrums!" volunteered a voice from the crowd.

"I think this will cure him a bit," said Denny. "The little one has been bringing him his dinner lately, you know. A child like that has no business along the tracks, but he usually had her come back of the roundhouse, where there wasn't so much risk. This time, I suppose she feared she'd be late, and crossed over the busiest switches. My heart stood still, lads, when, ten minutes since, five hundred feet away from her, I saw her trip, fall, strike her head on the rails, and lay there stunned, squarely in the way of a dead-end freight, coming."

Big Denny squirmed with real feeling in his powerful, husky voice, as he dabbed the perspiration from his brow.

"Next thing, I saw a flash come out through the roundhouse door here. It was--him!"

Mechanically the crowd turned. Twenty pairs of eyes rested on Ralph, whom Denny had pointed out.

"Yes, sir--it was him, young Fairbanks! He's got the right blood in him, that kid. I knew his father, and he wouldn't be Jack Fairbanks' son if he hadn't acted just as he did!"

No comment could have pleased Ralph more than that. He darted a grateful look at his bulky champion.

"No one any good seemed to have noticed the accident except him," went on Denny, the eyes of his absorbed auditors again riveted intently upon him. "I counted the seconds in a sort of sickly horror, for it seemed impossible that he could make it in time."

"But he did!" cried a strained voice.

"He did--it was terrifying. The last ten feet he saw his only chance. It was like a fellow sliding for base. Flat he dived and drove. It must have been an awful scrape! The first wheels of the backing car fairly reached the little angel's long, golden curls. As it was, they cut the dangling hat straight in two. He grabbed her, just escaping the wheels, not a second too soon."

With a working face the lame helper had stood listening, rooted to the spot like a statue.

The crowd swayed towards Ralph. They were all in one uniform mood of admiration for his nervy exploit, only they expressed it in different ways.

A dozen shook his hand till they nearly wrung it off; a big, bluff fireman, with a fist like a ham, slapped his shoulders so exuberantly that the contact nearly drove the breath out of his body.

"As to that little heap of rubbish," observed Big Denny, with lofty contempt indicating the broken brick wall--"I reckon Tim Forgan won't let that count against the life of that child."

Ralph arose to his feet.

"But I didn't do it," he asseverated.

"Don't you worry about trifles, kid," advised Denny.

"But I didn't!" insisted Ralph.

Denny looked annoyed. He wished to dismiss the subject peremptorily while his hero was still on the pedestal, and, human-like, he believed Ralph was trying to square himself at the cost of a lame explanation, or a lie.

"That's--that's right," suddenly interposed a quavering voice.

"Hello!" laughed Denny, turning to confront the sphinx-like helper, whose

taciturnity was proverbial. "You'll be making a speech, next!"

"Yes," bolted out the lame helper, very much agitated over his own unusual temerity.

"Give it a voice, Limpy."

"He didn't do it."

"Didn't do what?"

"Run that engine into the wall."

"How do you know?"

"I saw him--he started her up, but shut her off, dead, before he jumped for the tracks and ran outside."

Ralph looked surprised, but pleased, Big Denny convinced, and the crowd tremendously interested.

On the outskirts of the crowd Ike Slump gave ear, perked up his face in a grimace, and a minute later sneaked out of the place.

"Saw the whole thing," declared Limpy. "Fellow in the next engine leaned over soon as Fairbanks left, slipped the lever, and let her drive."

"Who was it?" demanded the watchman indignantly.

"Slump, the scamp."

"Where is he?"

The crowd made a search, but it was unavailing--Ike Slump had "jumped his job" permanently, to all appearances, for his locker was empty.

The fireman came out of the office.

"She's all right," he announced to Denny, "but the old man's terribly broken up. Better go in and give him a word."

"All right," said Denny--"you come, too, Fairbanks."

"I'd rather not," said Ralph--"I've got work to do."

"You take a rest and eat your dinner before you do anything else," advised the big watchman.

The noon whistle sounded just then and dispersed the crowd. Ralph went over to a bench and brought out his dinner pail.

His arm was sore and smarting, but he was not at all seriously crippled, and he sat thoughtfully eating his lunch and wondering how the damage to the wall would be repaired.

Ralph noticed the two engineers leave the office, then Big Denny. The latter had hold of the hand of little Nora.

He led the way up to Ralph. Limpy had just taken his seat on the other end of the bench.

"I'm going to take her home," said the watchman. "Nora, do you know who this young gentleman is?"

The little girl looked still pale and frightened, but except for the torn dress

and hat and a dark bruise on her forehead seemed none the worse for her recent perilous experience.

"No, sir," she said shyly.

"It's Ralph Fairbanks. He saved your life."

"Oh, sir! did you? did you?" she cried, running up to Ralph. She put her arms around his neck and kissed him, the tears running down her cheeks. "When I tell mamma, she'll come down and thank you, too!" she continued and then passed on.

Ralph was affected by the incident. His heart warmed up as he reflected how the tide of feeling had changed towards him in the past hour. Then, reaching for his lunch pail, his hand unexpectedly came in contact with a big, juicy square of pie. The lame helper had disappeared.

It was a further tribute from that strange, silent man, and it told Ralph unmistakably that beyond that grim wall of reserve was probably hidden a heart of gold.

The excitement and rough usage of the morning had used up Ralph considerably. He felt the need of fresh air, put aside his dinner pail, and started for the outside.

Just then, the helper came across to him from the direction of the little office.

"Wanted," he said sententiously. "Foreman wants to see you."

CHAPTER XIV--RALPH FAIRBANKS' REQUEST

Ralph felt the sense of a crisis strong upon him. Circumstances had given some stormy features to the morning's progress, but had cleared the air generally.

He believed, all told, that he had carried off the honors quite creditably, and was in a measure master of the situation.

When he came to the office door it was partly open, but he knocked.

"Come in," spoke the foreman's voice, a good deal toned down from its usual accents of asperity.

Tim Forgan stood over near the window, his back turned to Ralph. His hands, clasped behind him, fumbled nervously. He was palpably in a disturbed mood, and from the vague view Ralph had of his side face he noted it was pale and anxious-looking.

"Sit down," directed the foreman. He stood in the same position for nearly a minute. Then very abruptly he turned, came up to Ralph, extended his hand as if with an effort, and said, almost brokenly:

"Fairbanks, I want to thank you for what you have done for me and mine."

"I am glad I did it," answered Ralph simply.

The foreman sank into a chair, started to speak, arose, paced the floor restlessly, finally halted in front of Ralph, and looked him squarely in the face.

"Fairbanks," he said, "I believe I have done you an injustice. Don't answer. Let me speak while the mood is on me. I am a proud man, and it's hard for me to root out my settled suspicions. I won't say they are all gone yet, but after what has happened it would be wrong and churlish for me to hold back what is on my lips. When you came here this morning, I was satisfied that you came here as a spy upon my actions."

"Oh, Mr. Forgan!" explained Ralph involuntarily.

"And I prepared to treat you as a spy. I have had trouble with the master mechanic, off and on--that is, we are rivals in the race for the presidency of the local labor council, and Ike Slump's father, when I told him about your card from the master mechanic, scented a plot at once."

"Why, Mr. Forgan!" exclaimed Ralph in amazement, "I never saw the master mechanic until night before last, then only for less than two minutes, and my meeting with him was purely accidental."

The roundhouse foreman looked Ralph through and through.

"I believe you, Fairbanks," he said, at length. "You don't look like the lying, sneaking sort, and Denny says he'd bank his soul on you. He says I've got bad, crafty advisers. Maybe so, maybe so," went on Forgan, half to himself. "I wish I'd kept out of the labor ring. It makes one fancy half his friends enemies. Drop that, though. I've made my confession, and I believe you're square. I've sent for you to exonerate you from all part in the smash-up, and to tell you that I owe you a debt I can never pay. I'll try to square some of it, though. Fairbanks, you shall stay here, and I shall give you more than a chance to forge ahead."

"I thank you, Mr. Forgan," said Ralph gratefully.

The foreman strode over to the window again. Ralph studied this strange make-up of real force, dark suspicions and ungovernable impulses, but did not appear to watch him. In a covert way, with a sidelong glance at Ralph, the foreman opened the door of a little closet, took out a dark bottle, and Ralph could hear the gurgling dispatch of a long, deep draught.

He had overheard some of the men in the dog house hinting at the boss' failing, that morning. Now, Ralph knew what it was, and the discovery depressed him.

The stimulating draught seemed to restore the foreman's equilibrium, for in a minute or two, when he again addressed Ralph, his old half-dignified, half-autocratic manner had returned to him.

"We shall have no more Ike Slump here, father or no father," he observed. "I'm going to give you a chance, Fairbanks."

"Thank you, Mr. Forgan."

"Keep on as wiper till I get a new helper, and I'll give you a boost into an extra berth quicker than any boy ever shot up the roundhouse ladder before. I tell you, I'll never forget what you've done for me--and my dear little Nora!"

Ralph arose.

"Mr. Forgan," he said, "I am much obliged to you, and I hope I shall deserve and win your good opinion. But I want to earn my way. I don't wish to slip over one single branch of the course that will make a thorough, all-around, first-class railroad man out of me, and too fast promotion might spoil me."

The foreman understood him, but the liquor had exhilarated him, and he said:

"All the same, I'm your friend for life, Fairbanks--and I give you my word, when you ask me a favor, I'll grant it."

Ralph bowed and proceeded towards the door. Forgan was back at the closet almost immediately, Ralph wavered. He formed a quick resolution, and stepped back into the room just as the foreman turned, wiping off his lips.

"Mr. Forgan," said Ralph, "you will not be offended at something I feel it my duty to say?"

"Not a bit of it," pledged the foreman.

"You said I might ask you a favor."

"Just name it, Fairbanks."

"I shall, but first, I want to say this: You are in a fine, responsible position here, and your control and your influence affect every man in your service."

"I worked hard for the job," asserted Forgan proudly.

"I know you must have done that," said Ralph, "and I also know you must have had good abilities to step so high over the heads of others. But sometimes, Mr. Forgan--you will acknowledge it yourself--your temper, your impulses, your suspicions get the better of you."

Ralph was treading on dangerous ground. He realized it, for a certain quick flash came into Forgan's eyes. It was quenched, however, at an evident memory of the incident of the morning; and the foreman spoke, quite gayly:

"Go ahead, I'll listen. I see your drift."

"You have lots of friends, sir--try and know the real ones. And, Mr. Forgan, now for the favor I have to ask."

The foreman's bushy brows met in a suspicious way, but he declared promptly:

"You have only to ask."

"You will grant it?"

"For little Nora's sake, lad, I'd give you half I own!"

"I don't want that, Mr. Forgan. The favor I have to ask is--don't drink."

It was out, with an effort--Ralph had placed a pleading hand on the foreman's arm. He felt Forgan start and quiver. Would he burst into one of his uncontrollable fits of passion and storm and rave, and probably assault him?

The climax delayed so long that Ralph ventured another appeal.

"For little Nora's sake, Mr. Forgan!" he pleaded.

"Boy, you have said enough--go! go!" spoke Forgan huskily.

He almost pushed Ralph from the room. The door went shut, with Ralph standing outside, his breath coming quickly, for the episode had been one of intense strain.

Ralph sighed. Had he gone too far? The sincerity of his wish for the foreman's good told him he had not.

In the little office he could hear Forgan striding to and fro. Suddenly there was a halt.

Then came a crash. If only for the time being, Tim Forgan had been influenced to a holy, beneficent decision. He had shattered the wretched black bottle to atoms.

"Thank God!" breathed the young railroader fervently.

CHAPTER XV--"VAN"

When the one o'clock whistle sounded, Ralph started over for the engine stalls.

"Hold on!" challenged the lame helper, suddenly appearing in his usual extraordinary way.

"What's the trouble?" asked Ralph.

"Boss says you're on the sick list."

"But I'm not!" declared Ralph with a smile and mock-valiantly waving his injured arm.

"Says you're to go home, and report in morning."

"But I can't do that," demurred Ralph.

"Must--orders."

"It would worry my mother, she would think something serious was wrong with me, while I feel as well as I ever did in my life--yes, better, even," insisted Ralph.

"Well, you're not to work, boss says--you can loaf, if you like."

"That's something I don't fancy."

"Then watch me, and I'll show you some things."

"Good!" assented Ralph. "If they are bound to have me invalided, at least let me learn something in the meantime."

Limpy did not talk much, but after an hour of his company Ralph voted him a wonder.

There must be some vivid history back of the man, Ralph theorized, for there were sparkles of real genius here and there in his movements and explanations of the next two hours.

He showed Ralph the true merits and economics of the wiper's avocation in a quick, practical way that proved Ike Slump was a novice and a bungler.

Then the helper took Ralph under his special tuition higher up in the scale.

Ralph was in a real transport of delighted interest as the lame helper taught him the first principles of preparing, running and controlling a locomotive.

He did something more than control a throttle or move a lever--he explained why this and that was done, and demonstrated cause and effect in a clear-cut way that gave Ralph more real, sound information in two hours than he could have gained from the study of books in as many months.

The foreman passed in and out of the place several times during the afternoon, but seemed almost studiously to avoid contact or conversation with Ralph.

About four o'clock the helper, busy wheeling away the broken bricks from the hole in the wall, nudged Ralph meaningly.

"Slump's old man," he said tersely.

Glancing towards the office, Ralph saw a coarse-featured, disorderly looking man conversing with the foreman.

The latter was cool, dignified and evidently laying down the law in an unmistakably clear manner to his visitor, who shrugged his shoulders, pounded his palms together, and seemed wroth and worked up over the situation they were discussing.

Ralph knew that Slump senior ran a saloon just beyond the freight sheds, and was glad to see him go off alone and evidently disgruntled and fancied he

caught an expression on Forgan's face indicating that he had done his duty and was glad of it.

"Bad lot," commented Limpy, coming back for some more bricks.

"Foreman?"

"No, Slump. It was two of his poison drinks four years ago that sent me home one night on the wrong tracks, crippled me for life, lost me my run, and made a pensioned drudge of me for the rest of my years," declared the helper bitterly.

By five o'clock the débris had been cleared away from the break in the roundhouse wall, the derailed locomotive backed to place, and things ready for the masons to repair the damage in the morning.

Ralph was walking away from a cursory inspection of the spot, when a whistle sounded directly outside. Then a hissing voice echoed:

"Hey, Slump!"

Ralph turned. A man was moving around the edge of the break in the wall.

"I'm not Slump," announced Ralph. Then he recognized the stranger. It was the tramp-like individual who had come after Ike Slump's dinner pail two nights previous.

"Oh!" he now said, drawing back in a suspicious, embarrassed manner. "Where's Ike?"

"He has gone home, I suppose," answered Ralph.

"Didn't--that is, he hasn't left his dinner pail for me, has he?" floundered the tramp.

"No, he took it with him. At any rate, his locker is empty."

"All right," muttered the fellow, edging away.

Ralph remembered that heavily-weighted dinner pail of Ike Slump's with some suspicion. Still, Ike's explanation of furnishing the man with a daily lunch looked plausible.

"Hold on," called Ralph after the receding form.

"What is it?" inquired the tramp, wheeling about.

"I'll help you out--wait a minute."

Ralph hurried to his locker. Fully half of his noonday lunch had been left untasted. He bundled up the fragments and returned to the break in the wall.

"Here's a bite," said Ralph.

"Thank you," growled the tramp gruffly, taking the proffered lunch.

A minute later Ralph was summoned to a bench placed under the windows at the south curve of the building.

Limpy stood on the bench, looking out.

"Come here," he directed. "No use!"

"What do you mean?" inquired Ralph.

"Look."

Ralph, clambering up to the bench, had the retiring tramp in full view.

The latter was piece by piece firing the lunch he had given him at switches and signal posts, as if he had a special spite against it.

"Didn't come for food, you see?" observed the helper.

"What did he come for, then?" demanded Ralph, indignant and wrought up.

Limpy simply shrugged his shoulders, and went off about his duties.

Ralph was not sorry when the six o'clock whistle sounded. He had gone through an uncommon strain, both mental and physical, during the day, and was tired and glad to get home.

Limpy, in his smooth, quiet way, arranged it so that he left the roundhouse when Ralph did, and as the latter noticed that his companion kept watching out in all directions, he traced a certain voluntary guardianship in the man's intentions.

But if Limpy feared that Ike Slump or his satellites were lying in wait, it was not along the special route Ralph took in proceeding homewards.

He reached the little cottage with no unpleasant interruptions. His mother welcomed him at the gate with a bright smile. Their boy guest was weeding out a vegetable bed. He immediately came up to Ralph, extending a beautifully clean full-grown carrot he had selected from its bed.

Ralph took it, patting the giver encouragingly on the shoulder, who looked satisfied, and Ralph was pleased at this indication that the boy knew him.

"How has he been all day?" Ralph inquired of his mother.

"Just as you see him now," answered the widow. "He has been busy all day, willing, happy as a lark. The doctor dropped in this afternoon."

"What did he say?" asked Ralph.

"He says there is nothing the matter with the boy excepting the shock. He fears no violent outbreak, or anything of that kind, and only hopes that gradually the cloud will leave his mind."

"If kindness can help any, he will get sound and well," declared Ralph chivalrously. "He doesn't talk much?"

"Hardly a word, but he watches, and seems to understand everything."

"What is that?" asked Ralph, pausing as they passed together through the side door.

The wood shed door was scrawled over with chalk marks Ralph had not seen there before.

"Oh," explained Mrs. Fairbanks, "he found a piece of chalk, and seemed to take pleasure in writing every once in a while."

"And just one word?"

"Yes, Ralph--those three letters."

"V-A-N," spelled out Ralph. "Mother, that must be his name--Van."

CHAPTER XVI--FACE TO FACE

Ralph Fairbanks' second day of service at the roundhouse passed pleasantly, and without any incident out of the common.

With the disappearance of Ike Slump a new system of order and harmony seemed to prevail about the place. The foreman's rugged brow was less frequently furrowed with care or anger over little mishaps, and Ralph could not help but notice a more subdued tone in his dealings with the men.

When Ralph came home that evening, his mother told him of a visit from the foreman's daughter-in-law and little Nora. They had brought Mrs. Fairbanks a beautiful bouquet of flowers, and their praises of Ralph had made the widow prouder of her son than ever.

That morning, Van, as they now called their guest, had insisted on going with Ralph to his work as far as the next corner, and it was with difficulty that the young railroader had induced him to return to the cottage.

That evening, Van met him nearly two squares away, and when he reached the house Ralph expressed some anxiety to his mother over their guest's wandering proclivities.

"I don't think he would go far away of his own will," said Mrs. Fairbanks. "You see, Ralph, he counts on your going and coming. This morning, after you sent him home, I found him on the roof of the house. He had got up there from the ladder, and was watching you till you were finally lost to view among the car tracks."

Ike Slump did not show up the third day. A fireman told Ralph that he had run away from home, and that his father had been looking for him. Ike had been seen in the town by several persons, but always at a distance, and evidently keeping in hiding with some chosen cronies most of the time.

"He's no good, and you'll hear from him in a bad way yet," was the railroader's prediction.

When No. 6 came into the roundhouse next morning, the extra who had taken engineer Griscom's place for two days told Ralph that the old veteran would be on hand to take out the afternoon west train himself.

Ralph got Limpy to help him put some fancy touches on the heaviest runner of the road. At noon he hurried home and back, and brought with him a bright little bouquet of flowers.

No. 6, standing facing the turntable at two o'clock that afternoon, was about as handsome a piece of metal as ever crossed the rails.

Old Griscom came into the roundhouse a few minutes later, his running traps slung over his arm, reported, and was surrounded by the dog house crowd.

This was his first public appearance since the fire at the yards. He still looked singed and shaken from his rough experience, but as he saw Ralph he extended his hand, and gave his young favorite a twist that almost made Ralph wince.

"On deck, eh?" he called cheerily. "Well, I call first choice when you get ready to fire coal."

"That's a long ways ahead, Mr. Griscom!" laughed Ralph.

"Forgan don't say so. Hi! what you giving me? A brand-new runner?"

The veteran engineer gave a start of prodigious animation and real pleased surprise as his glance fell on No. 6.

The headlight shone like a great dazzling brilliant, the brass work looked like gold. In the engineer's window stood the little bouquet, and the cab was as neat and clean as a housewife's kitchen.

Griscom swung onto his cushion with a kind of jolly cheer, and the foreman, catching the echo, waved his welcome and approbation in an unusually pleasant way from the door of his little office.

Big Denny had been a periodical visitor to the roundhouse since the rescue of little Nora Forgan.

He had taken a strong fancy to Ralph, it seemed, and whenever he had a few minutes to spare would seek out the young wiper, and seemed to take a rare pleasure in posting him on many a bit of technical experience in the railroading line.

He chatted with Ralph on this last occasion while the latter sat filling the firemen's cans with oil, and drew him out as to his home life, his mother and his reason for going to work.

"So Farrington holds a mortgage on your home?" said Denny. "I didn't know that. He's pretty rich, I hear. I remember the time, though, when people thought your father was his partner in some of his bond deals."

"Yes, mother supposed so, too," said Ralph.

"Your father put him onto the good thing the railroad was, first of all. I know that much," declared Denny.

"It looks as if my father lost all his holdings just before he died," said Ralph.

"Then Farrington got them, I'll wager that--the sly old fox!" commented Denny, who was generally strong in his personal convictions.

"Well, some day, when I am in a position to do so, I'm going to have Mr. Gasper Farrington hauled into court about the matter," observed Ralph. "If he has anything belonging to my mother and me, we want it."

"It seems to me you ought to find something among your father's papers shedding light on the subject?" suggested Denny.

"It looks as if my father had had blind confidence in Mr. Farrington," said Ralph.

"Yes, the old fox has a way of winding himself around his victims," declared the outspoken watchman. "I remember a fellow he wound up good and proper, about three years ago."

"Who was that?" asked Ralph.

"His name was Farwell Gibson. He got the railroad fever, sold his farm, came to the Junction, and he and Farrington had some deals. They had a big row one night, too, and Farrington threw Gibson out of his house, and some windows were broken. The neighbors heard Gibson accuse Farrington of robbing him. Next day, though, Farrington swore out a warrant against Gibson for forgery, and Gibson has never been seen since. Maybe," concluded Big Denny, "he killed him."

"Oh, he wouldn't do that!"

"Gasper Farrington has a heart as hard as flint," said Denny, "and would do anything for money."

"Farwell Gibson," murmured Ralph, memorizing the name.

When quitting-time came that evening, Ralph left the roundhouse alone, Limpy having been sent with a message to the depot.

As usual, he saved distance by following the tracks where they curved, then at a certain point cut through the unfenced back yards of some small stores fronting the depot street.

Beyond this was a prairie. Turning a heap of ties to take a last straight shoot for home, Ralph found his progress abruptly blocked.

"Thought we'd get you!" announced a familiar voice, and Ike Slump stepped into view.

CHAPTER XVII--THE BATTLE BY THE TRACKS

"What do you want?" demanded Ralph.

He did not at all look as if his hour had come, but he backed to a commanding position against the pile of ties, as half a dozen hoodlum companions of Ike Slump followed their leader into sight.

"Peel!" said Ike importantly, and he began to roll up his sleeves.

"I'm comfortable," suggested Ralph easily. "By the way, Ike, your father is looking for you."

"Never you mind about my affairs," retorted Ike. "It's you I've been waiting for, it's you I've got, and it's you I'm going to lick."

"What for?" asked Ralph.

"What for?" echoed Ike derisively--"hear him, fellows!"

"Ho! hear him!" echoed the motley crew at Ike's heels.

"I told you at the roundhouse that I'd pay you off, didn't I?" demanded Ike.

"I think I remember."

"Well, I'm going to do it."

"Here? And now?"

"Precisely."

"You insist that I've done something to be paid off for?"

"Yes. You insulted me."

"How?"

This was a poser. Ike was silent.

"Tell you, Slump," said Ralph, setting down his dinner pail. "You're just spoiling to do something mean. I never did you an injury, and I would like to do you some good, if I could. You're in bad company. You had better leave it and go home to your father. If you won't take advice, and are bound to force me to the wall--why, I'll do my share."

At Ralph's allusion to the company Ike kept, two of the biggest of his cohorts sprang forward.

"Your turn later," said Ike. "This is my personal affair just now."

"You will force things?" questioned Ralph calmly.

"What! Do you mean will I let you off? Nixy! No baby act, Fairbanks! Peel, and put up your fists."

"Very well," said Ralph. "I think I can manage you with my coat on."

Ralph was not a particle in doubt as to the ultimate result of the "scrap." He had gone through a half-vacation course of splendid athletic training, and his muscles were as hard as iron. Not so cigarette-smoking, loose-jointed Ike Slump.

"That for that sand trick!" announced Ike. "And that's for dodging that waste ball."

So sure was Ike of landing on Ralph's nose with one fist, that he supplemented his first announcement with the second one as his other fist circled to take Ralph on the side of the head.

Ralph did not dodge. He inwardly laughed at Ike's clumsy tactics. With one hand he warded off both blows, drew back his free fist, and let it drive.

"Ugh!" said Ike Slump.

As Ralph's knotty knuckles took him under the chin, there was a snap, a whirl, and Ike Slump keeled clear off his balance and sat down on the ground.

It was done so quickly and so neatly that Ike's cohorts were too astonished to move.

"Get up--go for him!" directed the biggest boy in the gang.

"I can't!" bellowed Ike, spitting out a tooth--"he's cracked my jaw. He had a spike in his hand!"

"Foul, eh!" scowled the big fellow, hunching towards Ralph.

The young railroader with a contemptuous smile extended both free palms. He shut them quickly together again, however, for he saw that Slump's crowd did not know the meaning of either honor or fairness.

So determined and ready did he look that the big fellow hesitated. Ralph heard him give some directions to his companions, and the crowd moved forward in unison.

"A rush, eh?" he said. "You're a fine bunch! but--come on."

Ralph's spirit was now fully aroused. He had no ambition to shine as a pugilist, but he would always fight for his rights.

The big fellow dashed at him, calling to his companions. Ralph shot out his right fist as quick as lightning. The blow went home, and the big bully blinked, spluttered, and reeled aside with his nose flattened.

Two of his companions sprang at Ralph, one on each side. Ralph caught one by the throat, the other by the waistband. They were hitting away at him, but

he knew how to dodge. To and fro they wrestled, Ralph knocking them together whenever he could, never letting go, and using them as a shield against the big fellow, who, as mad as a hornet and with a reckless look in his eye, had resumed the attack.

Suddenly the latter managed to dodge behind Ralph, put out his foot, tripped him, and the trio fell to the ground.

Ralph held on to his first assailants, struggling to a sitting position.

At that moment the big bully ran upon him. The cowardly brute raised his foot to kick Ralph. The latter saw he was at the rascal's mercy. He let go the two squirming at his side, shot out a hand, and catching the uplifted foot brought its owner pell-mell down upon him.

The bully struck his head in falling, and was momentarily dizzied. Ralph flopped clear over, sat upon him, and was kept busy warding off the blows of the two fellows he had released.

There were six others in the gang. These now made an onrush. Ralph tried to calculate his chances and map out the best course to pursue.

Just then a new element was injected into the scene.

Around the corner of the pile of ties came a new figure with cyclonic precipitancy.

It was Van, the guest of the cottage. He must have witnessed the scene from a distance. He swung to a halt, his face imperturbable as ever, but his eyes covering every object in the ensemble.

"Fight," he said simply, and swinging both arms like battering arms sailed into the nearest adversary.

"Don't strike him!" called out Ralph instantly--"he's wrong in his head!"

"We'll right it for him!" announced one of the crowd.

The speaker swung a bag as he spoke. It seemed to contain something bulky, for as it just missed Van's head and bounded on the shoulders of one of the user's own friends, the latter went down like a lump of lead.

Van never stopped. In a kind of windmill progress he struck out, sideways, in all directions. In two minutes' time he had cleared the field, every combatant was in flight, and leaning over and seizing the big bully squirming under Ralph, he weighted him on a dead balance for a second, and then sent him sliding ten feet along the ground after his beaten fellows.

Ralph released the other two and let them run for safety, actually afraid that his friend Van would do them some serious injury with that phenomenal ox-like strength stored up in his sturdy arms.

But Van was as cool as an iceberg. He was not even out of breath.

"More," he said

"No, no, Van!" demurred Ralph. "You've done nobly, old fellow. Let them

go, they've had their medicine. Carry this for me," and Ralph thrust his dinner pail into Van's hand, more to divert his attention than anything else. "They've left something behind, it seems."

Ralph picked up the bag he had seen used as a missile. Its weight aroused his curiosity, he peered into the bag.

"I see!" he murmured gravely to himself.

In the bottom of the bag was about thirty pounds of brass fittings. Ralph had seen bin after bin of their counterparts in the supply sheds near the roundhouse, and never in any quantity anywhere else.

These, like those, were stamped, and bore the impress that they were railroad property.

"You can come with me, Van," said Ralph, and turned back in the direction of the roundhouse.

The foreman was just leaving the office, Ralph dropped the bag inside the room.

"What's that, Fairbanks?" inquired Forgan, as he heard the stuff jangle.

"It's some brass fittings," explained Ralph. "I am sure they belong to the company. I found them in the hands of a gang of hoodlums, and of course they were stolen."

"Eh? hold on--this interests me!" and Forgan proceeded to inspect the contents of the bag "That's bad!" he commented with knit brows. "A leak like that shows something rotten on the inside! Tell me more about this affair, Fairbanks."

Ralph fancied he now understood the mission of the tramp who was in such close touch with Ike Slump, and also the reason why Slump's dinner pail was so heavy.

He did not, however, impart his suspicions to the foreman. The latter muttered something about the thing being important, and that he must look into it deeper, as Ralph stated that he had been assaulted by a gang of hoodlums who had left the bag of fittings behind them.

"Who are they?" questioned the foreman.

"I don't know their names."

"Was Ike Slump among them?" shrewdly interrogated Forgan.

"I don't care to say," answered Ralph.

"You needn't, I can guess the rest. Only don't forget what you do know if somebody higher up asks about this matter. I'm responsible here, and a leak in the supply department has dished more than one foreman. Thank you, Fairbanks--thank you again," added the foreman with real sentiment in glance and accents.

About ten o'clock the next morning Ralph was called to the foreman's office.

He expected some further developments in the matter of the brass fittings, but, upon entering the room, found himself face to face with Ike Slump's father.

The foreman was, or pretended to be, busy at his desk. Slump senior looked very much troubled. Ralph shrank from his repulsive face and a memory of his nefarious calling, but he nodded politely as Slump asked:

"This is young Fairbanks?"

The saloon keeper fidgeted for a minute or two. Then he said:

"I don't suppose you bear any particular good will towards me or mine, Fairbanks, but I've had to come to you. My boy assaulted you last night, I understand."

"Why, no," answered Ralph, with a slight smile--"he only tried to."

"Well, it's just this: He's in trouble, and he's likely to go deeper unless he's stopped. He keeps out of my way. His mother is heart-broken and sick abed over his doings."

"I am very sorry," said Ralph. "Can I do anything to help you, Mr. Slump?"

"I think you can," answered Slump. "You know Ike and his associates, and maybe you can get track of their hang-out. I can't. Fairbanks," and the man's voice broke, "it's killing my wife! It's a lot to ask of you, under the circumstances, but Forgan says you seem to have a knack of doing everything right. I want you to find my boy--I want you to try to prevail on him to come home. Will you?"

Ralph was a good deal moved as he thought of the stricken mother. He had small hopes of Ike Slump--smaller than ever, as he considered the manner of man his father was, but he answered promptly:

"I'll try, Mr. Slump."

CHAPTER XVIII--A NAME TO CONJURE BY?

Big Denny came to where Ralph was putting the finishing touches to one of the fast runners of the road about ten o'clock one morning.

Nobody in the world enjoyed talk and gossip like the veteran watchman, as Ralph well knew, and it really pleased him to have his company, for among the driftwood of all his desultory confidences Denny usually produced some point interesting or enlightening.

On this especial occasion there was a zest to the old watchman's greeting of the young railroader that indicated he had something of more than ordinary interest to impart.

"By the way, Fairbanks," he observed, "I saw that rich old hunks, Farrington, this morning. He was down here."

"At the roundhouse, you mean?" inquired Ralph, with some interest.

"Well, not exactly. He was over by the switch towers, met Forgan, and had quite a talk with him. Thought I'd post you."

"Why, what about?" asked Ralph.

"He'll be after you, next."

"Not until the first of next month, when the interest is due, I fancy," said Ralph. "I do not think Mr. Farrington has any interest in us outside of his semi-annual interest."

"He'll be nosing around, see if he isn't!" predicted Denny oracularly. "I've got a tip to give you, Fairbanks. I got the point yesterday. There's some talk of running a switch over to Bloomdale. If they do, they'll have to condemn a right of way, along where you live. Word to the wise, eh? nuff said!" and Denny departed, with a significant wink.

Ralph wondered if there was any real basis to Denny's intimation. He fancied it was only one of the rumors constantly floating around about prospective railroad improvements.

That evening, however, Ralph received a suggestion that put him on his guard, if nothing more.

He had gone down town to get some nails for Van, who was building a new chicken coop, when he met Grif Farrington.

"Just looking for you," declared Grif. "I say, Fairbanks, the old man is anxious to see you."

"Your uncle wants to see me?" repeated Ralph incredulously.

"Right away. Asked me to find you and tell you. Business, he says, and important. You couldn't run up to the house now, could you?" he added.

Ralph hesitated--he was suspicious of old Gasper Farrington, and he had no business with him, for it was his mother's province to attend to anything concerning their money dealings, and he did not feel warranted in interfering.

On second thought, however, Ralph decided that they could not know too much of the plots and intentions of Farrington, and he told Grif he would go up to the house at once.

Gasper Farrington lived in a fine old mansion, from parsimony, however, allowed to go to decay, so that all that was really attractive about the place were the grounds.

Ralph found the magnate seated on the porch. He knew that something was

up as Farrington arose with a great show of welcome, made him sit down in the easiest chair, and treated him as if he were the dearest friend the old man had in the world.

"You sent for me, Mr. Farrington?" Ralph observed, between some flattering but meaningless remarks of his wily host.

"Why, yes--yes," assented Farrington.

"On business, your nephew told me."

"H'm--hardly that. I'll tell you, Fairbanks, I have been greatly interested and pleased to notice the manly course you have taken."

"Thank you, Mr. Farrington."

"In fact, I have taken pains to inquire of your direct employers as to your capability and record, and am gratified to find them good--exceptionally good."

Ralph wondered what was coming next.

"Your father was my friend--I want to be yours. I am not without a certain interest and influence in the matter of the railroad, as you may know, and I have decided to exert myself in your behalf."

"You are very kind," said Ralph.

"Not at all. I recognize merit, and I--u'm! I feel a decided duty in the premises. The auditor of the road at Springfield holds his office through my recommendation. I was talking with him yesterday, and I have a proposition to make you. I will give you five hundred dollars more than the market price for your house and lot, rent you a place I own at Springfield for a mere nominal turn, and guarantee you a good office position in the auditor's department there at forty dollars a month to start in with."

Ralph opened his eyes wide. It was certainly a tempting bait. Had any person but crafty old Gasper Farrington made the tender, he might have jumped at it.

Instantly, however, he remembered what Denny had said about the new line, recalled the fact that Farrington had never been known to make a bad bargain, compared confining labor over a desk in a hot, stifling room with the free, glad dash of mail and express, the bracing air, the constant change of real railroad life, reflected that once away from Stanley Junction he and his mother would never be likely to learn more of Farrington's past doings with his dead father, and--Ralph decided.

"Mr. Farrington," he said, "in regard to the cottage, that is my mother's sole business, and I do not think she could be induced to sell you a place that has been a very dear home to her. As to myself--I thank you for your kind intentions, but at present I have no desire to change my work."

"Why not--why not?" cried Farrington. He had been unctuous, smirking and eager. Now his brow darkened, and his thin lips came together in a sour,

vicious way.

"Well, I have marked out a certain thorough course after much thought and advice, and do not like to depart from it."

Gasper Farrington got up and paced the porch restlessly. The old rancor and dislike came back to his thin, shrewd face.

"You'll regret it!" he mumbled.

"I hope not," said Ralph, rising also.

"Young man," observed Farrington, stabbing at his guest with a quivering finger, "I warn you that you are taking an obstinate and fatal course."

"Warn?" echoed Ralph--"that is pretty strong language, isn't it, Mr. Farrington?"

"And I mean it to be so!" cried Farrington, casting aside all disguise. "I said I had influence. I have. You can't work for the Great Northern in Stanley Junction, if I say not."

Ralph stared at the speaker incredulously. He could not comprehend how Farrington could show the bad policy to put himself on record with such a remark, be his intentions what they might.

"In fact, sir," said Ralph, "you mean to intimate that you will get me discharged?"

"I mean just that," unblushingly admitted Farrington. "I will allow no pauper brood to stand in the way of my--of my----"

Ralph felt the blood surge hotly to his temples. With a strong effort he controlled himself.

"Mr. Farrington," he said quietly, though his voice trembled a trifle, "you have said quite enough. I want to tell you that you are a wicked, hypocritical old man. You have no interest in my welfare--you are after our little property, because you have learned that the railroad may soon pay a big price for it. You want us out of Stanley Junction, because you are afraid we may find out something about your dealings with my dead father. To carry your point, you threaten me--me, a poor boy, just starting in to win his way by hard work--you threaten to plot against and ruin me. Very well, Mr. Farrington, go ahead. I have too much reliance in the teachings of a good mother to believe that you will succeed."

"What! what!" shouted the magnate, almost choking with rage and mortification at this unvarnished arraignment, "you dare to tell me this? In my own house!"

"You invited me here," suggested Ralph.

"Get out--get out!" cried Farrington, running to the door for his cane.

"You will fail," spoke Ralph, going down the steps. "You won't gag me as you have others. As you did----"

Like an inspiration a suggestion came to Ralph Fairbanks' mind at that mo-

ment.

It seemed as if he had right before his eyes once more the mysterious, blurred letter that Van had brought. He recalled one of its last words. He had mistaken it for "Farewell." Now the light flashed in upon his soul. "Farwell" was the name Big Denny had spoken--"Farwell Gibson."

"As you did Farwell Gibson," concluded Ralph, at a venture.

"Who? Come back! Stay, Fairbanks, one word!"

The old man's face had grown white. His eyes seemed suddenly haunted with dread.

"That name!" he gasped, clutching at a chair for support. "What do you know of Farwell Gibson?"

"Only," answered Ralph, "that he wrote to my father last week."

"He--wrote--" choked out Farrington, "last week--to your father--Farwell Gibson!"

The information was the capping climax. The old man uttered a groan, fell over, carrying the chair he grasped with him, and lay on the porch floor in a fit.

CHAPTER XIX--IKE SLUMP'S FRIENDS

When Ralph reached home after his exciting half-hour with Gasper Farrington, he was considerably wrought up.

He had called for assistance at the Farrington home as soon as its owner went down in a fit, a servant had hurried to the porch, between them they got Farrington into the house and on a couch, a physician was telephoned for, and as soon as he saw returning signs of consciousness on the part of his host and discerned that his condition was not really serious, Ralph left the place.

Van had gone to bed, and Ralph found his mother alone. They sat in the little parlor, conversing. Mrs. Fairbanks was very much perturbed at Ralph's recital of his sensational encounter with Gasper Farrington.

"I fear he is an evil man, Ralph," she said, with anxiety. "He has power, and he will not hesitate to misuse it."

"He seems to be determined to drive us out of Stanley Junction," said Ralph. "And I fear he may succeed."

"Not while I have you to care for and your interests to protect!" declared Ralph, with vim. "That old man has aroused the fighting blood in me, mother, and I'll see this thing through, and stay right on the spot, if I have to peddle papers for a living. But don't you worry about his getting me discharged. I have made some friends in the railroad business, and I believe they will stick by me."

Mrs. Fairbanks sighed in a worried way.

"I wish you had not run counter to him to-night," she said.

"I am glad," responded Ralph. "Don't you see he has shown his hand? Why, mother, can anything be plainer than that he realizes our presence here to be a constant menace to some of his interests? And as to that random shot about Farwell Gibson--it told. He is afraid of us and this Gibson. Well, it has all cleared the way to definite action."

"What do you mean, Ralph?"

"I mean that the letter Van brought us must have been very important. I believe this man, Gibson, is alive, but in hiding. He shows it by the roundabout, laborious way he took to send the letter, and his ignorance of father's death. I believe that letter hinted at his knowledge of wrongs Farrington has done us. If we can find this person, I feel positive he can impart information of vital value to our interests."

Mrs. Fairbanks acquiesced in her son's theories, but was timorous about further antagonizing their enemy. It was mostly for Ralph and his prospects that she cared.

"I have been thinking the whole matter over, mother," proceeded Ralph, "and I believe I see my course plain before me. As soon as I can, I am going to ask the foreman to give me a couple of days' leave of absence. Then I will get Mr. Griscom to take Van and me on his run, and return. Van came in on his morning run, so I conjecture he must have got on the train somewhere between Stanley Junction and the terminal. Is it not possible, going back over the course, that he may show recognition of some spot with which he is familiar?"

"Yes, Ralph, that looks reasonable."

"Once we know where he came from, and find his friends, we can trace up this Mr. Gibson. Don't you see, mother?"

Mrs. Fairbanks did see, and commended Ralph's clear, ready wit in formulating the plan suggested. She did not show much enthusiasm, however. She was more than content with the present--a comfortable home, a manly, ambitious boy at her side, full of devotion to her, and making his way steadily to the front.

Ralph was called into the foreman's office almost as soon as he reached the roundhouse next morning.

Forgan looked serious and acted anxious.

"Sit down, Fairbanks," he directed, closing the door after his visitor. "We're in trouble here, and I guess you will have to lift us out of it."

"Can I, Mr. Forgan?" inquired Ralph.

"You can help, that's sure. Those brass fittings you found were stolen from the railroad company."

"I thought that. They had the Great Northern stamp on them."

"That isn't the worst of it. Some one has been systematically rifling the supply bins. I suppose you know that some of these pinions and valves are very nearly worth their weight in silver?"

"I know they must cost considerable, those of a special pattern," assented Ralph.

"They do. That little heap you brought in the bag represents something over fifty dollars to the company."

Ralph was surprised at this declaration.

"To an outsider they are not worth one-tenth that amount, because there is a penalty for selling them, even as junk, and the only people who handle them are stolen-goods receivers, who melt them down. Well, Fairbanks, I started an investigation in the supply department last evening. The result is astonishing."

The foreman's grave manner indicated that he had some pretty sensational disclosures in reserve.

"We find," continued Forgan, "that there has been cunning, systematic thievery; some one entirely familiar with the supply sheds and their system has removed a large amount of plunder, probably a little at a time. They, or he, whoever it is, did not excite suspicions by taking the fittings from the bins, but tapped the reserve boxes and kegs in the storeroom. We estimate that nearly two thousand dollars' worth of stuff has been stolen."

Ralph was astonished at this statement.

"That means trouble for me," announced the foreman, "unless I can remedy it. I am supposed to employ reliable men, and safeguard the goods in their charge. The railroad company doesn't stop to find excuses for shortages, they simply discharge a man who is not smart enough to protect his own and the company's interests."

"I understand," murmured Ralph.

"A new inventory is due next month. I must recover that stolen plunder--at least discover the thieves--to square myself before then," announced Forgan. "We can't afford to dodge any corners, Fairbanks, and I want you to be clear and open with me. I believe that young rascal, Ike Slump, had a hand in the robbery, and I further believe that you know it to be a fact."

"I do not positively know it, Mr. Forgan," said Ralph.

"But you suspect it, eh? Don't shield a rogue, Fairbanks. It isn't fair to me and it isn't fair to the company. Ike's father told me this morning you promised to try and find his son for him. I think you are shrewd enough to do it. All right--at the same time keep in mind my interest in the affair, and try and get a clew from Ike Slump as to those stolen fittings. You can call the day off--I'll pay your time out of my own pocket."

Ralph understood what was expected of him. He received the suggestions of his superior without further questioning, as if they comprised a regular order, went to his locker, and in a few minutes was ready for the street.

He did not know where to find Ike Slump, but he was thoroughly acquainted with the town, which had its rough quarters, like all other railroad centers.

Extending from the depot along the tracks for half a mile were small hotels, workingmen's boarding houses, second-hand stores, restaurants saloons, and all kinds of little business places.

They comprised a nest where most of the drinking and all of the crime of the place occurred. It was not a desirable quarter, but Ralph realized that within its precincts he was likely to locate Ike Slump, if at all in Stanley Junction.

Ralph put in an hour strolling in the vicinity. He kept a keen eye out for those of Ike's chosen chums whom he knew. He did not believe that Ike was likely to show himself much in the day-time. His father had been unable to find him, and Ike probably had some safe hide-out, and pickets on the lookout, besides.

About eleven o'clock, coming down the tracks near the scene of the battle royal, Ralph discovered half a dozen boys in the rear yard of a blacksmith shop.

Various vehicles, sheds and general yard litter enabled Ralph to approach them unobserved. He fancied that at least two of the crowd had been mixed up in the fracas which Van's valiant onslaught had terminated, for one had a swollen nose and another a black eye.

Ralph suddenly appeared before the crowd, engrossed in their game. They rose up, startled. Then he was apparently recognized, for a quick murmur went the rounds, and they quickly hunched together with lowering brows and suspicious looks.

"I want to have a word with you fellows," said Ralph bluntly.

They were six to one, and here was a golden opportunity to avenge the ignominious defeat they had sustained. Ralph's off-hand bearing, however, his clear eye and manly tones, impressed them, and perhaps, too, they had a wholesome fear that his giant-fisted champion, Van, might be lurking in the vicinity.

No one spoke, and Ralph resumed.

"See here, boys, this is business. I want to find Ike Slump, and it's for his own good. He's likely to get into trouble if he doesn't see his father very soon, and it will be the police, not me, next visit. His mother's sick, boys, sick abed, and

heart-broken over his absence. Come, fellows, tell me where he is."

"You're pretty fresh!" spoke out one of the crowd. "What are you after? a bluff, or a give-away?"

"If you mean I am misrepresenting Ike's danger, or that I have any unfriendly feeling towards him," said Ralph, "you are entirely wrong. I'm trying to help him, for the sake of his poor mother and others--not hurt him."

Two or three heads went close together. There was a brief undertoned conference.

"We don't bite," finally announced the spokesman of the crowd. "We'll take your message to Ike. If he wants to find you, he knows how."

"All right," said Ralph, moving away--"only he may wait too long. I'll give you a quarter to put me in touch with him for two minutes."

No one responded to the offer. A little dirty-faced urchin, who looked unhappy and out of place with that motley crew, looked longingly at Ralph. No one called him back as he moved slowly away.

Ralph left the place, and had gone about two hundred yards down the track along a high fence, when he heard a thin, piping voice call out:

"Hold on, mister, back up--I want to tell you something!"

CHAPTER XX--THE HIDE-OUT

"Where are you?" Ralph inquired, somewhat mystified.

"Here I am--the wiggling stick. I'm behind it."

"Oh! I see!" said Ralph--"and who are you?"

"Me? Oh, nobody in particular."

Ralph now discovered that his challenger was on the other side of the close board fence, and through a crack was moving a thin splinter of wood up and down to indicate his exact location. Ralph came up to the spot.

"What do you want?" he inquired.

"That quarter, mister--you know, back there with the gang, I heard you. Well, here I am. Pass through the coin, will you?"

Ralph got a dim focus through the crack, and surmised that the speaker was the dirty-faced little fellow who had looked at him so longingly when he offered the money.

"You know where Ike Slump is?" asked Ralph.

"No, I don't, mister."

"Well, then?"

"But I can put you on."

"On to what?"

"Where he goes every night--where you're sure to find him after dark."

"Well, tell me."

"See here, mister," piped the little fellow in an uncertain voice. "The gang 'd kill me if they knew I was giving 'em away, but I'm just about starving. Because I'm little they make me do all kinds of work, and when there's anything to eat they forget I'm around. They stole some melons out of the cars last night. All I got was the rind."

"Who are you, anyway?" asked Ralph.

"Oh, I'm nobody. I was at the county farm, but run away and got in with these fellows. Wish I was back! I'd go, only they'd punish me and lock me up. You give me the quarter, and I'll meet you later and show you where Ike Slump hangs out nights."

"You'll keep your promise?"

"Honor bright!"

"Where will you be?"

"Right here, only outside the fence."

"What time?"

"Just at dark."

"I'll do it," said Ralph, slipping a twenty-five-cent piece through the crack in the fence. "Remember, now. I trust you, and I'll give you as much more to-night if you don't play me any tricks."

"Crackey! that's fine; only you keep mum on my showing you?"

"I certainly will," assured Ralph.

He did not feel certain that he had accomplished much. It all depended on the reliability of the urchin. Ralph went back to the roundhouse and told the foreman he could do nothing further toward locating Ike Slump until nightfall, and put in the afternoon at his regular duties, although Forgan told him he need not do so.

Ralph went home at quitting-time, got his supper, explained to his mother that he had something to attend to for the foreman, and not to worry if he was not back early.

He reached the rendezvous agreed on at dusk, and after a few minutes' wait-

ing saw the little fellow of the morning coming down the tracks.

"I'm here," announced the new arrival.

"So am I, as you see," answered Ralph. "How did you get on to-day--let's see, what is your name?"

"Teddy."

"All right, Teddy. Did you get something to eat?"

"Not a great deal. The fellow saw me buying some grub. I told 'em I found a quarter, and they made me play craps with the change--twenty cents."

"Of course you lost."

"Oh, sure--knew that before I began. They always win, them fellows. Say, mister, please, I'll go ahead alone, because if any of them should happen to see me with you it would be all-day for Teddy!"

"Go ahead," directed Ralph.

The boy went down the tracks. At the end of the fence he turned into a yard with a barn at the back. The building in front was a dilapidated two-story frame structure. The windows at the rear were fastened up, but the one doorway visible was open, and led into a dark hallway.

Teddy had paused near a wagon, and looked anxious to get away.

"That's the place," he said. "You go in that door and up some stairs. There's a big room in front where the crowd meet nights, and play cards, and drink and smoke. Ike Slump spends all his evenings here."

"All right," said Ralph. "There's another quarter. See here, Teddy, if you'll come down to the roundhouse to-morrow, I'll give you a good dinner. I want to have a talk with you."

"Well, I'll see," said the urchin, palming the coin with a chuckle and disappearing at once.

Ralph looked the place over. Finally, from his knowledge of the street beyond, he located it properly in his mind. The building, was in the middle of what was known as Rotten Row. It was a double store front, one half of which was occupied by a cheap barber shop. The other half, Ralph remembered, was a second-hand clothing store run by a man named Cohen, who also did something in the pawnbroker line.

Ralph had often noticed the dilapidated place, and knew that its denizens had a shady reputation. He realized that Cohen was just about the man to encourage boys to hang around and steal, and doubtless controlled the rooms upstairs.

Ralph entered the dark rear hallway after some deliberation. When he reached the top of the stairs he paused and listened.

Under the crack of the door some gleams of light showed. The front room of the upper story lay beyond, Ralph theorized. He could catch a low hum of voices, the click of dominoes, and there was a tobacco taint in the atmosphere. He ran

his hand over the door, but it had no knob. the keyhole was plugged up, and he could not see into the room.

Ralph judged from the appearance of things that Ike Slump came to the place by the front way, so there was no use waiting for him at the rear stairs. He reasoned, too, that if he went around to the front he would be seen by some of Ike's cohorts, and the latter would be warned and kept out of the way.

"I wish I could get a chance into that front room," mused Ralph. "Once I come in range of Ike, I think I can at least say enough to get him to listen to me."

There was one other room on the second floor and one other door. Ralph found a knob here. But the door was locked. It had, unlike the other door, a transom. The sash of this was gone, and the space stopped up with a loose sheet of manilla paper.

Ralph lightly lifted himself to the knob on one foot. He pushed at the paper, and it moved out free except at two corners where it was tacked. It was no trick at all for Ralph to lift himself through the transom and drop to the floor on the other side.

With some satisfaction he noticed that this room connected with the front apartment, the light coming in over its transom reflecting into the rear room so that he could make out its contents plainly.

At one side stood a big hogshead nearly full of loose excelsior, used for packing. Near it were as many as twenty flat boxes. Ralph touched one with his foot. He could not budge it, and then, drawing closer, he looked into a box with its cover off, and saw that it was nearly full of brass fittings.

"They're here, there's a lot of them," breathed Ralph quickly, "packed up for shipment. This is a find! What had I better do?"

The discovery modified all Ralph's prearranged plans. He knew quite well that if found in this room his presence would show a *prima facie* evidence that he knew the storage place of the stolen plunder. Ralph decided to get out as quickly as he had got in, and try to come upon Ike from some other point of the compass, without giving the alarm to Cohen, or whoever really controlled the stolen goods.

Before he could make a move, however, a key grated in the lock of the connecting room. The knob was broken off on the inside of the door over which he had just clambered. To reach the transom and get sufficient purchase to let himself over through the aperture he would have to have a box or chair to stand on.

There was no time to select either. The door leading to the front room came briskly open. Ralph looked for a hiding place. None presented, for the boxes lay flat on the floor, and the hogshead was away from the side wall.

Ralph thought quick and acted on an impulse. He thrust his arm down into the hogshead. Its light contents gave way to the touch.

Leaping its rim, Ralph sank as in a snowbank, ducked down his head, pulled

the stringy wooden fiber over it, and snuggled inside the hogshead, out of view.

CHAPTER XXI--A FREE RIDE

The hogshead in which Ralph had ensconced himself was made of loose, defective staves. He found himself facing an aperture, through which he could look quite readily.

Two persons entered the room. One was Ike Slump. The other Ralph recognized as the second-hand dealer, Cohen. The latter carried a lamp, which he placed on a shelf. He closed the door after him, and sat down on a box. Ralph's range of vision was immediately impeded. Ike had lifted himself to the edge of the hogshead and perched there, his feet dangling and beating a tattoo on the staves with his heels.

"Now then, Slump," were Cohen's first words, "you're bound to leave?"

"Haven't I got to?" demanded Ike testily. "I'm in a nice box, I am--lost my job, don't dare to go home, and no money."

"I gave you some."

"A measly ten dollars in a week, not a fiftieth part of what I brought in. See here, Cohen, you haven't given me a fair deal. I've taken all the risk, and what have I got?"

"The risk? the risk?" repeated Cohen. "My young friend, it's me who takes all the risk. Suppose the railroad men should drop in here and find the stuff? Where would I be? As to money, will anybody else you know touch the stuff?"

"Well, I've got to get some funds, I'm going to slope the town for good," announced Ike. "Now, there'll be no slip up if I carry out your plans?"

"Not a bit of it," answered Cohen. "I have no facilities here for handling railroad junk. Jacobs, at Dover, has. I don't dare to ship it by rail. He has his own melters. I furnish the horse and wagon. We'll load you up, and cover the boxes with vegetables. All you've got to do is to drive out of town and deliver the goods at Dover. You say your friend, the tramp, will go with you?"

"Yes, but what about the team? I won't come back, you know. I'm going West for a spell."

"Jacobs will attend to the team. See, here is a letter--give it to him. He'll give you the twenty-five dollars I promised you, and that's the end of it."

"All right. What time shall we start?"

"When the town is asleep, and nobody nosing around. Say one o'clock, sharp."

"I'll be ready."

The conference seemed ended. Ralph comprehended that his double mission would be ineffective unless he got word to Ike Slump's father and the roundhouse foreman within the next four hours.

He lay snug and still, formulating an escape from the place as soon as the two plotters should withdraw.

Ike slipped to the floor, took out a cigarette, lit it, threw the match away, and stretched his arms and yawned.

"Give me a little loose change to play with the crowd, Cohen, will you?" he asked.

Cohen reached in his pocket, but very quickly drew out his hand again empty, to point it excitedly at the hogshead with the sharp cry.

"Fire! look there! You stupid, see what you've done!"

"What have I done? Ginger--the cigarette!"

Ralph quivered as he listened and looked. A swishing sound accompanied a brilliant flare. Ike had carelessly thrown the match with which he had lighted his cigarette into the midst of the dry, tindery excelsior.

"Put it out! Stamp it out!" yelled Cohen.

Ike grabbed a handful or two of the flaming mass, burned his fingers, and retreated, while Cohen made a frightened rush for a stand in one corner of the room holding a big pitcher.

He ran at the hogshead with it. It was half-full of water. Cohen doused it into the hogshead just as Ralph, unable to stand the pressure any longer, arose upright.

Ike gave a stare and a shout. Cohen jumped back with alarm in his face. The water had extinguished the blaze, but the episode had betrayed Ralph's presence to his enemy.

"Who are you?" ejaculated Cohen darkly, grasping, the pitcher and again advancing.

"Needn't ask him--I know!" snapped out Ike. "Grab him, Cohen! It's Ralph Fairbanks, from the roundhouse, and he's a spy!"

Ralph leaned a hand on the hogshead rim to get purchase for a leap out of his difficulties. Ike made a spring for him and grabbed one arm, preventing the movement.

"If he's a railroader and a spy," cried Cohen, "we're in for it!"

"Don't let him go, then--oh!"

Ike went spinning, for Ralph had given him a quick blow, knocking him aside. Cohen swung the pitcher aloft. Down it came with terrific force. Ralph experienced a blow on the side of the head that instantly shut out sense and sight. He fell over the edge of the hogshead, and hung there limp and lifeless.

It was the first blank in his life. Its duration Ralph could only surmise as he opened his eyes. At first he fancied he was blind, for everything was pitchy black about him. He sat up with difficulty, putting a hand to his head where it felt sore and smarted.

Ralph found a bad cut there, which had bled profusely. The blow with the pitcher had been cruelly heavy. He sat up, swaying to and fro, and soon traced out his environment.

He was in a freight car, its doors and windows were closed, and it was rolling along at a good fast rate of speed.

Ralph reasoned out his situation. His enemies had fancied he was seriously hurt, or wanted him out of the way until they could safely remove the stolen plunder. His hopes and plans were effectually balked if he had been long insensible, or was far on the free trip, for which they had booked him. They had carried him from Cohen's rooms by way of the back stairs, had thrown him into the empty car, and had left him to his fate.

Ralph tried the side door of the car. To his satisfaction it shoved open freely. Getting his eyes used to the darkness and his mind clearer, as the moments sped by, he endeavored to guess his location and estimate the time.

He was partly familiar with the road, and knew considerable as to the various passenger and freight trains and their schedule and route. Ralph concluded that he was on the regular nine o'clock freight, which usually hauled empties, going south. Judging from distant lights in houses scattered on the landscape, he estimated that it was about ten o'clock.

He soon surmised from landmarks he passed that the train was not on the main line. As he neared a cattle pen he knew exactly where he was--two miles from Acton and about twenty-two from Stanley Junction.

"They don't stop for ten miles," quickly reckoned Ralph. "There's the creek. I've got to get to Acton and back to the Junction before midnight, if I hope to accomplish anything."

The train slowed somewhat on the up grade. Ralph clung to the door and looked ahead. It was a long train, and he was at about its middle. He had an idea of trying to get to the roof, run back to the caboose, and try and interest the conductor. On second thought, however, he realized that he could not expect them to stop for him. He would only lose time. A daring idea presented itself to his mind, and his breath came quick. An opportunity hovered, and he had too

much reliance in himself to let it pass by.

"I've got to get back and stop the removal of that stolen plunder," he kept telling himself over and over, fixing his eyes on the signals that indicated the bridge over the creek.

Ralph posed for a spring as the locomotive struck the bridge and the gleaming waters came nearer and nearer. The bridge had no railing, and they were on the outer side; Ralph posed himself steady and true, let go the door, and leaped into the darkness as the car he was in reached the middle of the bridge.

Then he dropped down like a shot, struck the cold, deep water, and went under.

CHAPTER XXII--BEHIND TIME

The boy was completely at home in the water, but the present instance was somewhat extraordinary. The shock and chill of his daring jump, added to his naturally weakened condition after Cohen's stunning blow with the pitcher, helped to confuse him. But he never lost his presence of mind, and as he felt himself deprived of his usual buoyancy, he struck out under water for the shore.

He waited on the bank long enough for the water to drip off from him, and getting his breath, started to regain the railroad tracks.

When he came to a little station he found it closed for the night, but he knew that the agent must live in some one of the few houses in the settlement. He might locate him and induce him to come to the station and telegraph to Stanley Junction. With the aid of a signal lantern, however, Ralph was able to see the clock in the station. It was a few minutes after ten o'clock.

"There's a train reaches the Junction at eleven twenty-five," he reflected. "By hustling I can catch it at Acton. I can tell more and do more personally in five minutes than I can in five hours by wiring."

Ralph reached Acton some minutes before the West train came in. He had some change in his pocket, paid his fare to the Junction, and went out on the rear platform as they neared the destination.

He left the train a mile from the depot, swinging off at a point that would enable him to reach the roundhouse foreman's house by a short cut.

Ralph found the place closed up. There was a light in one upper room, however, and he had only to knock twice when Forgan came to the door in his shirt-sleeves.

"Is it you, Fairbanks?" he said, in some surprise.

"Yes, sir, and--special!"

"Why, what have you been into?" exclaimed Forgan, catching a glimpse of Ralph's bedraggled form and disfigured head.

"I have been in a freight car for one thing, and in the river for another," said Ralph. "There is no time to lose, Mr. Forgan, if you want to get back those stolen fittings."

"You know where they are?"

"I know where they were at eight o'clock," responded Ralph, "but I know they won't be there much after midnight.

"Good--wait a minute," directed Forgan.

He hurried back into the house and returned drawing on his coat. "I was just going to bed," he explained. "Now, then, Fairbanks," as he led the way to the street. "Tell your story--quick."

Ralph recited his experience of the past four hours, and Forgan hastened his steps as the narration developed the necessity of sharp, urgent action.

"Fairbanks, you are a trump!" commended Forgan, as the story was all told. "I'll leave you here. You get home, into dry clothes, and have your hurt attended to. You had better take the sick-list benefits for a day or two. Good-night--till I have something more definite to say to you."

A dismissal did not suit Ralph at all. It looked like crowding him out of an exciting and interesting game only half-finished.

"I might help you some further," he began, but Forgan interrupted him with the words:

"You've done the real work, Fairbanks, and neither of us will care to muddle in with the details of arrest. I shall put the matter directly in the hands of the road detective, Matthewson. I am sorry for his father's sake if Ike Slump gets caught in the net, but he deserves it fully, and I can't stop to risk the interests of the railway company."

Ralph went home. As he expected, his mother was waiting up for him. She was not the kind of a woman to faint or get hysterical at the sight of a little blood, but she was anxious and trembling as she helped Ralph to get into comfortable trim.

"Don't worry, mother," said Ralph. "This is probably the end of trouble with the Ike Slump complication."

"I always fear an enemy, Ralph," sighed the widow. "It seems as if you are fated to have them at every step. I keep thinking day and night about Gasper Farrington's unmanly threat."

"Mother," said Ralph earnestly, "I am trying to do right, am I not?"

"Oh, Ralph--never a boy better!"

"Thank you, mother, that is sweet praise, and worth going through the experience that will make a man of me. Well, I am going to keep right on doing my duty the best way I know how. I expect ups and downs. Men like Farrington may succeed for a time, but in the end I believe I shall come out just right."

Ralph found himself a trifle sore and stiff the next morning, but he started for work as usual. He was curious as to the outcome of the foreman's action the night previous. Forgan, however, did not show up at the roundhouse till ten o'clock. He at once called Ralph into his little office.

"Well, Fairbanks," he said briskly, "I suppose you will be interested to know the outcome of last night's affair?"

"Very much so," acknowledged Ralph.

"The road detective and myself were at Cohen's before midnight. The birds had flown."

"Had they moved the plunder, too?"

"Yes, what you described as being in boxes was all carted away."

"And Ike Slump had gone?"

"Presumably. We found that two horses and a wagon belonging to Cohen were missing. The only person we found, outside of Cohen, was a little fellow asleep in an outside shed."

"Was his name Teddy?" And Ralph gave a rapid description of the county farm waif.

"That's the boy. He's in jail with Cohen, now. They want to detain him as a witness. In Cohen's barn, hidden under some hay, we found two old locomotive whistles. He claims that he did not know they were there. The road detective, however, says if we can fasten the least real suspicion on Cohen and break up his fence, we will have rooted out this robbery evil, for the crowd he housed and encouraged to steal has scattered."

"Has Mr. Matthewson tried to overtake the wagon?"

"Yes, he has men out in pursuit. If we can recover those fittings, Fairbanks, it will be a glad day for me and a lucky one for you."

But with the arrest of Cohen, his release on bail, bound over to appear before the September grand jury, the affair seemed ended.

The little fellow, Teddy, could not, or would not tell, much and was also released. Ike Slump's crowd melted away, and Ike Slump, and his tramp friend, and Cohen's two horses and wagon, and the boxed-up brass fittings, had vanished

as completely as if the earth had opened and swallowed them up.

CHAPTER XXIII--BARDON, THE INSPECTOR

Matters dropped into a pleasant routine for Ralph, the two weeks succeeding his rather stormy introduction into active railroad life at the roundhouse of the Great Northern at Stanley Junction.

It was like a lull after the tempest. The youthful hoodlum gang that had been a menace to Ralph and the railroad company had been entirely broken up.

Tim Forgan was a changed man. He and the senior Slump had drifted apart, and the foreman's previous irascibility and suspicious gloom had departed. He was more brisk, natural and cheery, and Ralph believed and fervently hoped had given up the tippling habit which had at times made him a capricious slave to men and moods.

The lame helper had become a useful, pleasant chum to Ralph. There was not a day that he did not teach the novice some new and practical point in railroad experience.

Gasper Farrington Ralph had not met again.

At the cottage Van led an even, happy existence, making no trouble, being extremely useful and industrious, and daily more and more endearing himself to both Ralph and Mrs. Fairbanks.

With the dog house crowd Ralph had become a general favorite. He had won the regard of those rough and ready fellows, and his loyal adhesion to Griscom in the fire at the shops, his rescue of little Nora Forgan, and his manly, accommodating ways generally, had enforced their respect, and more than one dropped his oaths and coarseness when Ralph approached, and they tipped over the liquor bottle of one of the "extras" who had the temerity to ask Ralph to test its contents.

Altogether, Ralph was going through a happy experience, and every day life and railroading seemed to develop some new charm of novelty and progress.

It was with a proud spirit that he took home his first month's salary, twenty-seven dollars and some odd cents.

Those odd cents, with some added, Ralph stopped near the depot to hand over to little Teddy.

The county farm orphan had been turned loose from custody after a week's imprisonment, with orders to report to the police at nine o'clock every Monday morning.

He was practically on parole, the authorities hoping that on the trial of Cohen he might give some evidence that would implicate the stolen-goods receiver, and Ralph had run across the little fellow drifting aimlessly about the town.

Ralph had a long talk with him, then he decided to "stake" him as a newsboy. The depot watchman agreed to let him sell papers at the train exit, and Teddy had done fairly well, earning enough to pay for his lodging, Ralph making up the deficiency as to meals.

It was a bright hour in Mrs. Fairbanks' life when, after putting together what money she had with Ralph's earnings, and deducting the interest due Gasper Farrington, they were able to count a surplus of nearly twelve dollars.

Mrs. Fairbanks took the interest money to a bank where she had been notified the note was deposited, paid the amount, received the note, and with a lightened heart contemplated the future.

Two mornings later, when Ralph entered the roundhouse, he was accosted by Limpy in a keen, quick way.

"Primping day, Fairbanks," said the lame helper. "You want to hustle."

"What are you getting at?" inquired Ralph.

"Inspection."

"That's new to me."

"So I'll explain. The inspector is on his tour, we got the tip to-day. Came up on the daylight mail."

"What does he inspect?"

"Everything from a loose drop of oil to a boiler dent. He is so beloved that the dog house crowd kick loose all the litter cans soon as he's gone, and so particular that he inspects the locomotives with a magnifying glass."

"Who is he?" inquired Ralph curiously.

"Bardon is his name--it ought to be Badone! He's a relative of and trains with the division superintendent. He acted as a spy at the switchmen's strike, got nearly killed for his sneaking tactics, and the company rewarded him by giving him a gentlemanly position."

Ralph readily saw that this Mr. Bardon was not a favorite with the rank and file of the railroad crowd.

"Well, we'll have to show him what a lot of active elbow grease will do

towards making this a model roundhouse," said Ralph cheerfully.

Limpy was not at all in harmony with this idea, and showed it plainly by action and words. He and the others considered the roundhouse and its privileges essentially their personal property, and resented advice or censure, especially from a man whom they intensely disliked.

During the afternoon various little things were done about the dog house that indicated the spirit of the crowd there. A pasteboard box nailed to the wall bore written directions to engineers and firemen to keep their kid gloves there. Another stated that brakemen must not wear turned collars. Various receptacles were labeled "For cinders," "Clean your nails here," and the general layout was a palpable satire on the strained relations with an expected visitor who was considered a martinet.

Ralph went carefully and conscientiously to work to brighten up things a bit and make them look their best, while Limpy growled and grumbled at him all the afternoon.

About four o'clock the lame helper was enjoying a brief respite from work at his usual lounging place, standing on a bench and looking out of a window. He called Ralph so suddenly and sharply that the latter hurried towards him.

"Quick!" uttered Limpy, face and hands working spasmodically, as they always did when he was excited.

"What's up?" inquired Ralph, leaping to the bench beside him.

"Look there!" directed the helper.

He pointed to a long freight train backing down the tracks. It had just passed a switch.

"Pivot loose, and the signal flanges exactly reversed!" pronounced Limpy quickly. "They think they are on track A. Say, it's sure to be a smash!"

In a twinkling Ralph's eye took in the situation. The train was on a curve, and had run back all right in response to switch A, set open, according to the white indicator on top. But red should have shown, it appeared. The pivot holding the signal in unison with the operating bar must have become loosened, and the wind had blown the signal plate awry.

The freight, therefore, had struck track B, which a hundred feet further on split off onto two sets of rails. Both had short ends, terminating at bumpers, and each held a single car.

Track C held a gaudy, expensive car belonging to some traveling show, all gold and glitter, and must have cost eighteen thousand dollars. Track D held an old disabled box car. And into one or the other of these the backing freight was destined to run unless checked inside of the next half minute.

"Give me a show!" spoke Ralph, in a hurry.

He brushed Limpy aside, leaped through the window, struck the ground

eight feet below the high sill, and made a run towards the backing freight.

The curve prevented his seeing the engine or any one to whom he might signal. He doubled his pace, reached the split switch, unlocked the bar, half-lifted it, and stood undecided.

It was not his province to interfere, he well knew, if half the cars on the road were reduced to kindling wood through the mistake or carelessness of some one else, but action was irresistible with his impetuous nature when the same meant timely service.

If he left the switch as it now was, the freight would back down into the show car with terrific destructive force.

It seemed a pity to spoil that new pretty model of the car builder's art. Ralph discerned that the box car was ready for the scrap heap, and decided.

He pulled the switch over, not a moment too soon, jumped back, and the next minute the freight train struck the solitary box car, and it collapsed like a folding accordion.

CHAPTER XXIV--A NEW ENEMY

The box car was smashed teetotally. The car that struck it had one end battered in, its rear trucks rode up over the débris threatening to telescope or derail others, but the engineer ahead, catching the token of some obstruction from the shock, shut off steam quick enough to prevent any very serious general results.

The crash had sounded far and wide. Ralph stood surveying the wreck and ruin in a kind of fascinated daze.

Yardmen came rushing up from all directions. Soon too, the brakeman of the freight and its engineer were hurrying to the scene of the wreck.

More leisurely, a man carrying a cane, faultlessly dressed, and accompanied by the depot master, crossed from the semaphore house to the spot.

Ralph turned to look at the stranger of the twain as he heard a voice in the crowd say:

"There's Bardon, the inspector."

The engineer was vociferously disclaiming any responsibility in the affair, and his brakeman tranquilly listened to him as he recited that he had taken signals as set.

The one-armed switchman who had charge of these tracks appeared on the scene, his signal flag stuck under his perfect arm, and looking flustered.

Everybody was asking questions or explaining, as the depot master and his companion edged their way to the rails.

Ralph had a full view now of the man he knew to be Bardon, the inspector.

His first impression was a vivid one. He saw nothing in the coarse, sensual lips and shifty, sneering eye of the man to commend him for either humanity or ability.

"What's the trouble here?" questioned Bardon, with the air of a person owning everything in sight, and calling down the humble myrmidons who had dared to interfere with the smooth workings of an immaculate railway system.

"You ought to be able to see," growled the freight engineer bluntly.

The inspector frowned at this free-and-easy, offhand offense to his dignity and importance.

"I'm Bardon," he said, as if the mention of that name would suffice to bring the stalwart engineer to the dust.

"I know you are," said the latter indifferently. "Cut off the two last cars," he ordered to his brakeman, turning his back on Bardon and starting back for his engine to pull out.

"Hold on," ordered the inspector.

The engineer halted with a sullen, disrespectful face.

"Well?" he projected.

"Who's to blame in this smash up?"

"Tain't me, that's dead sure," retorted the engineer, with a careless shrug of his shoulders, "and we'll leave it to the yardmaster to find out."

"*I* want to find out," spoke Bardon incisively--"I am here to do just this kind of thing. Can't you read a signal right?" he demanded of the brakeman.

The latter smiled a lazy smile, lurched amusedly from side to side, took a chew of tobacco, and counter-questioned:

"Can't you?"

Mr. Bardon, inspector, was getting scant courtesy shown him all around, and his eyes flashed. He deigned to glance at the first switch. It was set wrong, he could detect that at a glance.

"How's this?" he called to the one-armed switchman sharply. "You're responsible here."

"I reckon not, cap'n," answered the man lightly. "The switch is set on rule. I got no signal to change it."

"But the indicator's wrong?"

"That's the repair gang's business--and the wind. The Great Northern don't own the wind, so I reckon it will have to pocket the loss gracefully."

Bardon bit his lips.

"We've saved the junkmen a job as it is," said the freight engineer. "The switch was set for track C. You'd have had a pretty bill if you'd smashed that twenty-thousand dollar show car yonder."

"That's right--the switch was C open," declared the switchman.

"Then who changed it?" demanded Bardon, scenting a chance yet to exploit his meddling, nosing qualifications.

Ralph hesitated. He doubted if Bardon was the proper party to whom to report. He, however, simplified the situation by saying:

"I did it, sir."

"Eh? Why--you!" exclaimed the inspector, turning on him with a malevolent scowl.

"Yes, sir."

"What did you change it for?"

The freight engineer gave a derisive guffaw.

"To save the show car, of course!" he said quickly. "The company owes you about nineteen thousand nine hundred and ninety-nine dollars, kid!" declared the engineer, giving Ralph a glance of the profoundest admiration.

But Mr. Bardon, inspector, was not to be moved by matters of sentiment. He fixed a stony stare on the free-and-easy engineer, and turned upon Ralph, the icy, immovable disciplinarian to perfection.

"What right have you to tamper with the railway company's switches?" he demanded.

"None, perhaps," answered Ralph, "but----"

"You are a switchman?"

"No, sir, but I am an employe of the company."

"Oh, you are?"

Ralph bowed.

"In what capacity?"

"Wiper."

"At the roundhouse?"

"Yes."

"And you took it on yourself to----"

"To choose the best horn of a dilemma, and saved the company a big lump of money," put in the imperturbable freight engineer. "And bully for you, kid! and if we had more sharp young eyes and ready wits like yours, there would not be so many smash-ups. That's right, Bardon?"

The inspector scowled dreadfully. If the engineer had called him Mr. Bardon he might have coincided in the view of the case presented. Turning his back on the free and fearless knight of the lever as if he was dirt under his feet, he took out a pencil and memorandum book.

"I'll look into this matter myself," he said severely. "You say you are a wiper, young man?"

"Yes, sir," assented Ralph.

"Name?"

"Fairbanks--Ralph Fairbanks."

"What--eh? Oh, yes! Ralph Fairbanks."

The young railroader regarded the inspector with positive astonishment as he uttered that sharp startling "What." He was manifestly roused up. Quickly, however, Bardon recovered himself, looked Ralph over with a decided show of interest, seemed secretly thinking of something, and then, fingering over the pages of his memorandum book, appeared looking for a notation, found it apparently, glanced again at Ralph in a sinister way, and said calmly:

"Very well, get your time."

"What is that, sir?" exclaimed Ralph, startled anew.

"Laid off, pending an investigation," added Bardon.

Ralph's heart beat a trifle unsteadily, but he straightened up with decision.

"Does that mean, Mr. Bardon, that I am not to go back to work?"

"You can understand what you like," snapped the inspector, seemingly glad to show his authority to this disrespectful crowd, and appearing to bear some personal spite against Ralph in particular, "only you are suspended until this matter is looked into."

Bardon turned to resume his way with the depot master, who looked bored and uneasy.

"Hold on!" thundered a tremendous bass voice. "That don't work."

A greasy paw closed around the immaculate coat-sleeve of the inspector, who turned with a brow as dark as a thunder cloud.

"Drop my arm--what do you mean!" breathed Bardon, with a glance at the husky freight engineer as if he would annihilate him.

"Just this, Mr. Inspector Bardon," said the engineer, with a never-quailing eye and the zest of extreme satisfaction in words and bearing, "you can't lay anybody off."

"I represent the Great Northern Railway Company," announced Bardon grandiloquently.

"Read your rules, then," retorted the engineer, "and see how far it will sustain you in exceeding your duties. I tell you they won't uphold you, and I speak with the voice of eighty-six thousand men and their auxiliaries behind me--the

International Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers."

Bardon stood nonplussed. He fidgeted and turned ghastly with vexation.

"I'll see that the proper official carries out my instructions just the same," he said in a kind of a vicious hiss.

"There's just one man to help you, then," coolly announced the engineer, "and that's Tim Forgan."

The inspector moved hastily away.

"And he won't do it!" concluded the engineer, in an chuckling undertone, giving Ralph a ringing slap on the shoulder.

CHAPTER XXV--DIAMOND CUT DIAMOND

Ralph went back to the roundhouse a trifle perturbed in his mind as to the outcome of the episode of the hour.

Something instinctively told him that he was about to have trouble. He did not like that violent start of the inspector when he heard his name, and there was something sinister in the way Bardon had looked up some memoranda, and afterwards eyed him as a vulture might its prey.

Limpy nearly had a fit when he had managed to probe out of Ralph the details of his arraignment by the great and potent inspector.

"Lay you off for saving the company a small fortune?" raved the helper indignantly. "Say! you just tell that malicious scoundrel I told you to change the switch."

"I shall do nothing of the kind," answered Ralph calmly, "and you are a good deal more worried about the affair than I am. I acted as common sense and duty dictated, and I do not fear the final outcome."

Just before quitting-time Bardon came into the roundhouse. He was closeted with the foreman in his office until the whistle sounded, and as Ralph left the place both came out and began a tour of the place.

"I expect something will drop in the morning!" Ralph half-jocularly told Limpy, as he bade him good-night.

Ralph made it a rule to tell his mother everything of interest and importance that came up during the day. Mrs. Fairbanks was manifestly troubled when he had recited his encounter with Bardon.

After supper Ralph went out with Van to inspect the new chicken coop he had just built. He was surprised and pleased at the patience, ingenuity and actual hard work displayed in the same, and Van seemed to show a deeper appreciation and understanding of Ralph's commendation than he had heretofore displayed.

Ralph viewed him thoughtfully. He again began considering a plan to take Van down the road some day on the chance of locating his former home.

At nine o'clock that evening, just as Ralph was locking up for the night, there came a tremendous thump at the front door.

Ralph went thither, to confront Big Denny, the yard watchman.

Denny was in a feverish state of excitement, was perspiring, prancing about with his cane, never still, and laboring under some severe mental agitation.

"Alone, Fairbanks?" he projected, in a startling, breathless kind of a way.

"They've all gone to bed but myself," answered Ralph.

"Can I come in?"

"Surely, and welcome."

Denny thumped into the little parlor. He mopped his brow prodigiously, loosened his collar, fidgeted and fumed, and after looking cautiously around put his finger mysteriously to his lips with the hoarsely-whispered injunction:

"Secret as the grave, Fairbanks!"

Ralph nodded, with a smile indulging the whim or mood of his good loyal friend, who he knew was given to heroics.

"What's the trouble?" he asked.

"Bardon."

"I fancied so," said Ralph.

"Came right up here to see you," explained Denny. "Forgan sent me."

"The foreman?" murmured Ralph, in some surprise.

"Yes. You are not to report in the morning."

"Does Mr. Forgan say so?"

"Strictly. You are not to come near the roundhouse for a good many days. They've got it in for you, and Tim Forgan and I are going to rout 'em, horse and harness!"

"Rout whom?"

"Bardon and Farrington."

Ralph started at this mention of his capitalist enemy.

"Mr. Farrington?" he repeated.

"Yes, old Farrington."

"What has he got to do with it?"

"Everything," declared Denny expansively--"everything! The company is going to lay you off."

"Very well," commented Ralph quietly.

"Pending an investigation of the smash up of this afternoon."

"I apprehended it."

"Do you know what that means?" cried Denny, growing excited--"red tape. Do you know what red tape means? Delay, bother, no satisfaction, tire you out, get you out, throw you out! They catch weasels asleep, though, ha! ha! when they try it on two old war-horses like Tim and me!"

Big Denny hugged himself in the enjoyment of some pleasing idea not yet fully expressed.

"Here's the program," he went on: "the inspector came to Forgan. He'd got hold of the smashed roundhouse wall incident, and he had hold of the freight smash-up to-day. Said an example must be made, system must be preserved, at least a report to headquarters, and an investigation."

"What did Mr. Forgan say?" inquired Ralph.

"Listened--solemnly, didn't say a word."

"Oh!"

"Until Bardon asked him bluntly to lay you off."

"And then?"

"Refused--point-blank. Bardon left in a huff, with a threat; Tim gave me my point. I followed him. Well, soon as he gets back to Springfield he's going to get an order over Forgan's head to lay you off."

"Can he do it?"

"He won't do it."

"Why not?"

"For a simple reason."

"Which is?"

"We block his game. Have you got pen, ink and paper in the house?"

"Yes."

"Fetch it out."

Ralph wondered a little, but realized that he was in the hands of loyal friends.

"Now then, you write," directed Denny. "Mind you, Forgan is in this with me. You write."

"Write what?"

"Your resignation from railroad service."

"Whew!" exclaimed Ralph, putting down the pen forcibly.

"Looks hard, does it?" chuckled Denny.

"Why--yes."

"You'll do it, just the same," predicted the big watchman. "That resignation goes to headquarters. That ends Ralph Fairbanks, wiper, doesn't it?"

"I suppose it does--it looks very much like it!" added Ralph vaguely.

"It baffles Mr. Inspector Bardon, who drops the matter, beaten."

"But I've got to work for a living," suggested Ralph, in a half-troubled way.

"All right, we've fixed that--that's another section of the same game. Write out your resignation, and I'll tell you something interesting. Good!"

With complacency and satisfaction the watchman folded up and pocketed the resignation that Ralph wrote and handed him with evident reluctance.

"That settles the fact that Ralph Fairbanks is not a discharged employee!" chuckled Denny. "Now then, sign that."

The watchman had produced two papers. In astonishment Ralph recognized one as a check drawn in his favor by the railroad company for twenty dollars.

The other was a receipt witnessing that he had been reimbursed for time, damage to wearing apparel and railroad expenses the night he had discovered the stolen brass fittings. In brackets was the notation: "Special Service work."

"But I only spent thirty-five cents for car fare, and the suit of clothes I soaked is as good as ever," declared Ralph.

"You do as you're told, Fairbanks," directed Denny, with a magnanimous wave of his hand. "Now then, we, Tim and I and Matthewson, the road detective, estimate you had better keep active hands off railroading for about two weeks. In the meantime, Matthewson says you can take a run between here and Dover."

"That's where the stolen stuff, and horse and wagon, and Ike Slump and the tramp were started for," said Ralph.

"Exactly. They did not arrive. Matthewson's men have failed to discover the least trace of the layout after leaving Stanley Junction."

"Does he expect me to?"

"Who can tell--he wants you to try. Has considerable faith in your abilities--as we have. He gives you two weeks at ten dollars a week. Here's your credentials--pass on any hand car, freight train, box or gondola, passenger coach, smoker or parlor car, locomotive, freight, switch or passenger, on the Great Northern and all its branches."

Ralph caught his breath short and quick. This remarkable dovetailing of events and prospects was rather exciting.

Having got rid of his budget of intelligence, Big Denny subsided somewhat. He had something more on his mind, however, and he began in a more serious way:

"And now, Fairbanks, for the real milk in the cocoanut."

"You don't mean to say this isn't all?"

"Scarcely. We might have taken care of you in a less complicated way, only

that we made a certain discovery."

Ralph looked interested and expectant.

"It was this: Bardon, the inspector, Bardon, the ex-spy, is connected with Mr. Gasper Farrington."

Ralph said nothing. He recalled, however, the threat of the crafty old capitalist. His enemy had started in to use his influence.

"Yes," declared Denny, "Bardon went straight to Farrington's house. When he left there he went to find some old-time cronies at the Junction Hotel. I had a friend listening to some of his boastful talk. We know at this moment that Gasper Farrington offers him five hundred dollars to get you discharged and away from Stanley Junction."

"Which he won't do!" said Ralph very positively.

"Not while Tim and I are on deck," declared Denny as positively. "Listen, Fairbanks: before Saturday night Forgan will see the master mechanic, before the following Wednesday the master mechanic will see the division superintendent, before the following Saturday the president of the road will have in his possession your full and complete record, beginning with your heroic conduct at the fire at the yards, the rescue of little Nora Forgan, the discovery of the stolen fittings, the saving of the show car to-day, and your general good conduct and efficiency in the service."

Ralph flushed at the hearty encomiums of this loyal old friend.

"In another week," continued Denny, rolling the words over in his mouth and sprawling out with a sense of the keenest enjoyment, "we guarantee, Tim and I, a letter, something like this: 'Mr. Ralph Fairbanks: Dear Sir: Please come back to work.'"

"I'll thank you," said Ralph, with bright, glad, shining eyes. "My old place again--as wiper."

"Not much!" negatived Big Denny, looking bigger than ever as he rose to the full magnitude of his final declaration--"as switch towerman for the Great Northern Railway at sixty dollars a month!"

CHAPTER XXVI--A ROVING COMMISSION

It was difficult for Ralph to sleep after the departure of Big Denny. He was still under the disturbing influence of the exciting events of the afternoon and evening. His mother had not been disturbed by the watchman's visit. Ralph finally strolled out into the garden, and sat down in the little summer house to rest and think.

He did not exactly feel as though he were at the height of his ambition, but Ralph did feel exceedingly thankful and encouraged. He valued most the friends he had gained personally, from the lowly walks of life it was true, but who had been bettered and elevated by the contact.

The pre-eminent thought now in Ralph's mind was concerning Gasper Farrington. Had things gone on smoothly, and had the magnate left him alone, Ralph might have been inclined to accept the situation. His mother did not care to rouse a sleeping enemy, and he would have respected her decision. But now that Farrington had so palpably shown his intentions, had declared war to the knife, bitter and vindictive, all the fighting instincts in Ralph's nature arose to the crisis.

"I shall not take Mr. Matthewson's ten dollars a week unless I find the stolen plunder and really earn the money," Ralph reflected. "It is hardly probable I shall succeed along that line, after his expert assistants have failed. But in trying to locate Van's friends I shall probably be in the neighborhood of Dover, and I may stumble across some clew to Ike Slump's whereabouts."

Ralph went inside the house after an hour and brought out a railroad map. He studied the route of the Great Northern and the location of Dover, and went to bed full of the plan of his projected journey.

He showed his mother the check for the twenty dollars and his pass over the road the next morning, and explained his projects fully. They met with the widow's approbation.

"Not that I want to get rid of Van," she said feelingly. "He has grown very dear to me, Ralph. Poor fellow! Perhaps it is his affliction that appeals to me, but

I should be very lonely with him away."

"I do not think he has many friends who care for him," theorized Ralph, "or there would have been some search, or inquiry through the newspapers."

After breakfast Ralph went to the depot. He found his young pensioner, Teddy, in high feather over success in getting two hours' regular employment a day delivering bundles for a drygoods store. Ralph gave him some encouraging advice, and went to see the young doctor who had attended Van.

He explained his intended experiment clearly, and asked the physician's opinion as to its practicability.

"Try it by all means," advised the doctor heartily. "It can do no harm, and the sight of some familiar place may be the first step towards clearing the lad's clouded mind. A great shock robbed him of reason; a like event, such as strong, sudden confrontation by some person or place he has known for years, may restore memory instantly."

Ralph was encouraged. When he went home he sat down with Van and tried to fix his attention.

It was very difficult. His strange guest would listen and look pleased at his attention, but his eyes would wander irresistibly after some fluttering butterfly, or with a gleam of satisfaction over to the wood pile his careful manipulation had made as neat and symmetrical as a storekeeper's show case.

Ralph pronounced in turn the name of every station on the main line of the Great Northern, but Van betokened no recognition of any of them.

Ralph waited in the neighborhood of Griscom's house after the 10.15 express came in, and intercepted the engineer on his way homeward.

He showed his pass and explained his project. He wanted Griscom to allow himself and Van to ride on the tender to the end of his run and back.

"That's all right, Fairbanks," said the engineer, "pass or no pass. Be on hand at the water tank yonder as we pull out the afternoon train. I'll slow up and take you on."

Ralph tried to express to Van that afternoon that they were going on a journey. Van only looked fixedly at him, but when Mrs. Fairbanks handed him a parcel of lunch, he proudly stowed it under one arm, and when she put on him a clean collar and necktie, he showed more than normal animation, as though he caught a dim inkling that something out of the usual was on the programme.

Van went placidly with Ralph. The afternoon train came along a few minutes after they had reached the water tank.

"Now then," said Ralph, as Griscom slowed up, "be lively, Van!"

His words may have conveyed no particular meaning to his companion, but the approaching train, the picturesque track environment and Ralph's energetic motions roused up Van, whose face betokened an eagerness out of the common

as he commented:

"Engine."

"Yes, Van."

"Ride."

Ralph bundled him up into the cab, clambered back into the tender, and made a comfortable seat for Van on top of the coal.

On that perch the lad seemed a happy monarch of all he surveyed. Ralph realized that the variety and excitement had a stimulating influence on his mind, and that even if nothing materialized in the way of discoveries from the trip, the general effect on Van would be at least beneficial.

Griscom tossed a cheery word to his young passengers ever and anon. His fireman, a new hand, was kept busy at the shovel, and had no time to inspect or chum with the boys.

They passed station after station. Ralph kept a close watch on Van's face. It was as expressionless as ever. His eyes roamed everywhere, and he was evidently at the pinnacle of complacent enjoyment.

Outside of that, however, Van gave no indication that he saw anything in the landscape or the depot crowds they passed that touched a responsive chord of recognition in his nature.

Forty miles down the road was Wilmer. It was quite a town. Southwest forty miles lay Dover, and west was the wild, wooded stretch known as "The Barrens." This was no misnomer. There were said to be less than twenty habitations in the desolate eighty miles of territory.

The Great Northern had originally surveyed ten miles into this section with the intention of crossing it, as by that route it could strike a favorable terminal point at a great economy of distance. The difficulties of clearing and grading were found so unsurmountable for an infant road, however, that the project had been finally abandoned.

They passed Wilmer. Signals called for "slow" ahead, as a freight was running for a siding. They had barely reached the limits of the town when Griscom put on a little more speed.

"Whoop!" yelled Van suddenly.

Ralph had shifted his seat on account of some undermining of the coal supply, and at just that moment for the first time was away from the side of his fellow passenger.

Before he could clamber over the coal heap Van had arisen to his feet.

"Stop, Van!" shouted Ralph.

But Van's eyes were fixed on the little winding country road lining the railway fence at the bottom of the embankment.

An antiquated gig, well loaded and attached to a sorry looking nag, and

driven by a man well muffled up in a dilapidated linen duster, was plodding along the dusty thoroughfare.

Upon this outfit Van's eyes appeared to be set. His hand waved nervously, and he seemed to forget where he was, and was not conscious of what he was doing.

He was in the act of stepping off into nothingness, and in a quiver of dread Ralph yelled to the engineer:

"Mr. Griscom, stop! stop!"

But the engineer's hearing was occupied with the hiss of steam directly around him, and his attention riveted on signals ahead.

Ralph made a spring. Some lumps of coal slipped under his hasty footing. His hand just grazed a disappearing foot.

The train was going about fifteen miles an hour, and Van had recklessly taken a header down the embankment.

CHAPTER XXVII--RECALLED TO LIFE

Van landed half-way down the incline. His feet sank deep into the sandy soil, the shock threw him forward with dangerous velocity, and he went head over heels, slid ten feet like a rocket, and reached the bottom of the embankment.

His head landed squarely against the lower board of the fence. Rip! crack! splinter! The contact burst the board into kindling wood. Van drove through and about five feet beyond, and lay still and inert in the bed of the dusty country road.

Ralph believed he was killed. With a groan he leaped to the side of Griscom and grabbed his arm. The engineer's lightning eye followed his speechless indication of Van, and he pulled the machinery to a speedy halt that jarred every bolt and pinion.

Ralph was trembling with dread and emotion. He ran back along the track fifty feet, and breathlessly rushed down the incline at the point where Van had descended.

As he gained the bottom of the embankment his heart gave a great jump of joy. He saw Van move, struggle to a sitting posture, rub his head bewilderedly with one hand, and stare about him as if collecting his scattered senses.

"Are you hurt?" involuntarily exclaimed Ralph.

"Not much---- Hello! Who are you?"

Ralph experienced the queerest feeling of his life. He could not analyze it just then. There was an indescribable change in Van that somehow thrilled him. For the first time since Ralph had found him in the old factory he spoke words connectedly and coherently.

A great wave of gladness surged over Ralph's soul. He was a quick thinker. The presentation of the moment was clear. The young doctor at Stanley Junction had said that just as a shock had deprived Van of reason, so a second shock might restore it. Well, the second shock had come, it seemed, and there was Van, a new look in his eyes, a new expression on his face. Ralph remembered to have read of just such extraordinary happenings as the present. He had but one glad, glorious thought--Van had been recalled to life and reason, and that meant everything!

Toot! toot! Ralph glanced at the locomotive where Griscom was impatiently waving his hand. The Great Northern could not check its schedule to suit the convenience of two dead-head passengers.

"Quick, Van," said Ralph, seizing the arm of his companion--"hurry, we shall be left."

"Left--how? where?" inquired Van, resisting, and with a vague stare.

"To the locomotive. We must get back, you know. They won't wait."

"What have I got to do with the locomotive?"

"You just jumped from it."

"Who did?"

"You."

"You're dreaming!" pronounced Van.

"What you giving me--or I've been dreaming," he muttered, passing his hand over his forehead again.

Ralph suddenly realized that Van regarded him as an entire stranger, that time and explanation alone could restore a friendly, comprehensive basis.

He gave Griscom the go ahead signal. The engineer looked puzzled, but there was no time to waste, for the tracks were now signaled clear ahead. He put on steam and the train moved on its way, leaving Ralph and Van behind.

The boy paid no further attention to locomotive or Ralph. He struggled to his feet, and looked up the country road, then down it. The gig had disappeared, but a cloud of dust lingered in the air over where it had just turned a bend.

Van started forward in this direction. There was a pained, confused expression on his face, as if he could not quite get the right of things. Ralph came up to

him and detained his steps by placing a hand on his arm.

The way Van shook off his grasp showed that he had lost none of his natural strength.

"What you want?" he asked suspiciously.

"Don't you know me?"

"Me? you? No."

"Hold on," persisted Ralph, "don't go yet. You are Van."

"That's my name, yes."

"And I am Ralph--don't you remember?"

"I don't."

"Ralph Fairbanks."

Van gave a start. He squarely faced his companion now. His blinking eyes told that the machinery of his brain was actively at work.

"Fairbanks--Fairbanks?" he repeated. "Aha! yes--letter!"

His hand shot into an inside coat pocket. He withdrew it disappointedly. Then his glance chancing to observe for the first time, it seemed, the suit he wore, apparel that belonged to Ralph, he stood in a painful maze, unable to figure out how he had come by it and what it meant.

"You are looking for a letter," guessed Ralph.

"Yes, I was--'John Fairbanks, Stanley Junction.' How do you know?" with a stare.

"Because I am Ralph Fairbanks, his son. When you first showed it to me----"

"Showed it to you?"

"Yes."

"Where?

"At Stanley Junction."

"I never was there."

"I think you were."

"When?"

"About three weeks ago. And you just left there this morning. You was with me on that locomotive that just went ahead, jumped off, and--you had better sit down and let me explain things."

Van looked distressed. He was in repossession of all his faculties, there was no doubt of that, but there was a blank in his life he could never fill out of his own volition. He studied Ralph keenly for a minute or two, sighed desperately, sat down on a bowlder by the side of the road, and said:

"Something's wrong, I can guess that. I had a letter to deliver, and it seems as if it was only a minute ago that I had it with me. Now it's gone, I find myself here without knowing how I came here, with you who are a stranger telling me strange things, and--I give it up. It's a riddle. What's the answer?"

Ralph had a task before him. In his judgment it was best not to crowd things too speedily, all of a jumble.

"You came to Stanley Junction with a letter about three weeks ago," he said. "It seemed you had dead-headed it there on the trucks from some point down the line."

Van nodded as if he dimly recalled all this.

"You hid in an old factory, or went there to take a nap. A baseball struck your head accidentally. We took you to our home, you have been there since."

"That's queer, I can't remember. Yes--yes, I do, in a way," Van corrected himself sharply. "Was there a chicken house there--oh, such a fine chicken house!" he exclaimed expansively, "with fancy towers made out of laths, and a dandy wind vane on it?"

"You built that chicken house yourself," explained Ralph.

"Oh, go on!" said Van incredulously.

"Well, you did."

"And there was a lady there, dressed in black," muttered Van, his glance strained dreamily. "She was good to me. She used to sing sweet songs--just like a mother would. I never had a mother, to remember."

Van's eyes began to fill with tears. Ralph was touched at the recognition of his mother's gentleness. Emotion had lightened the shadows in Van's mind more powerfully than suggestion or memory.

Ralph felt that he had better rouse his companion from a retrospective mood.

"You're all right now," he said briskly.

"And I was knocked silly?" observed Van "I see how it was. I've been like a man in a long sleep. How did I come out of it, though?"

"Just as you went into it--with a shock. I took you for a trip on a locomotive. Just as we got near here you made a sudden jump, rolled down the embankment, your head burst through that fence board yonder, and I thought you were killed."

Van felt over his head. He winced at a sensitive touch at one spot, but said, with a light laugh:

"I've got a cast-iron skull, I guess! But what made me jump from the locomotive? Did I have daffy fits?"

"Oh, not at all."

"Well, then?"

"Why," said Ralph, "I think the sight of a man in a long linen duster, driving a one-horse gig down this road startled you or attracted your attention, or something of that sort."

"Ginger!" interrupted Van, jumping to his feet, "I remember now! It was--him! And I've got to see him. He went that way. I'm off."

"Hold on! hold on!" called the dismayed Ralph.

But Van heard not, or heeded not. He sprinted for the bend in the road, Ralph hotly at his heels.

CHAPTER XXVIII--MYSTERY

Ralph outran his competitor, then kept easy pace with him, and did not try to stop him. He recognized a certain obstinacy and impetuousness in Van that he felt he must deal with in a politic manner.

He noticed, too, that Van was not in normal physical trim. The roll down the embankment had wrenched one foot slightly, and when they came to the bend to discover no gig in sight, and a series of other bends ahead, Van halted, breathless and tired.

"Give it up!" he panted, sinking to a dead tree. "Oh, well! I can catch him up later. Twenty-miles tramp, though."

"You seem to know who the man in the linen duster is?" ventured Ralph.

"Oh, yes."

"Is it important that you should see him?"

"Well, I guess so!"

Van was close-mouthed after that. He lay back somewhat wearily on the log and closed his eyes. The reaction from his tumble was succeeding the false energy excitement had briefly given him.

"See here," said Ralph, "I suggest that you take a little snooze. It may do you a heap of good."

"Wish that lady was here to sing one of her sweet songs!" murmured Van. "I just feel collapsed."

"If you will stay here quietly for a few minutes," suggested Ralph, "I will go to that house over yonder and get some water and a bite to eat. That will make you feel better. We had a lunch, but it was left behind on the locomotive."

"All right," said Van sleepily.

He seemed instantly to sink into slumber. Ralph waited a few moments, then he went over to a house on the outskirts of the town, all the time keeping an eye directed towards the spot where he had left his companion.

A woman stood in its open doorway. She had witnessed the jump from the locomotive, and referred to it at once.

"Where's the boy who was with you?" she inquired.

Ralph pointed to the spot where he had left Van.

"Was he hurt much?"

"I think not at all seriously. He's played out, though, and I have advised him to sleep a little."

"That's right," nodded the woman. "Natur's the panoseeds for all sich. That--and hot drops. You just take him a little phial of our vegetable hot drops. They'll fix him up like magic."

"Why, thank you, madam, I will, if you can spare them," said Ralph. "I was also going to ask you to put me up a bite of something to eat and let me have a bottle of water."

"Surely I will," and the good-hearted woman, pleased with Ralph's engaging politeness, bustled off and soon returned with a paper parcel, a two-quart bottle of water and a little phial filled with a dark liquid.

Ralph insisted on leaving her twenty-five cents, and went back to his friend with a parting admonition "to be sure and give him the hot drops soon as he woke up."

Van was sleeping profoundly, and Ralph did not disturb him. He sat watching the slumberer steadily. Van seemed to have placid, pleasant dreams, for he often smiled in his sleep, and once murmured the refrain of one of Mrs. Fairbanks' favorite songs.

An hour later Van turned over and sat up quickly. Ralph had been somewhat anxious, for he did not know what phase his companion's condition might assume at this new stage in the case. Van came upright, however, and dispelled vague fears--clear-eyed, smiling, bright as a dollar.

"Hello!" he hailed--"locomotive, friend, embankment. You're Fairbanks?"

"That's right," said Ralph--"you remember me, do you?"

"Sure, I do. What's in the bundle? Grub? and the bottle? Water? Give me a swig--I'm burned up with thirst."

"This first," said Ralph, producing the phial, and explaining its predicted potency. "Half of it--now some water, if you like."

Van choked and spluttered over the hot decoction. Ralph was immensely gratified as he followed it up by eating a good meal of the home-made pie, biscuits and cheese with which the kindhearted woman at the nearest house had provided them.

Van's affliction had lifted like a cloud blown entirely away by a brisk, invigorating breeze.

"Rested and fed," he declared, with a sigh of luxurious contentment and sat-

isfaction. "So I was crazy, eh?" he bluntly propounded.

"Certainly not."

"Idiotic, then?"

"Hardly," dissented Ralph. "My mother has grown to think almost as much of you as she does of me----"

"Bless her dear heart!"

"You've made our home lot look like the grounds of some summer villa," went on Ralph. "That don't look as though there was much the matter with you, does it?"

"But there was. It's all over now, though. My head is clear as a bell. I remember nearly everything. Now I want you to tell me the rest."

Ralph decided it was the time to do so. They would certainly be at cross-purposes on many perplexing points, until his companion had gained a clear comprehension of the entire situation.

There was never a more attentive listener. Van's eyes fairly devoured the narrator, and when the graphic recital was concluded, his wonderment, suspense, surprise and anxiety all gave way to one great manifestation of gratitude and delight, as he warmly grasped Ralph's hand.

"I never read, heard or dreamed of such treatment!" declared the warm-hearted boy. "You cared for me like a prince!"

"Seeing that I had so effectually put you out of business," suggested Ralph, "I fancy I had some responsibility in the case."

"I want to see your mother again," said Van, in a soft, quivering voice. "I want to tell her that she's woke up something good and happy and holy in me. I was a poor, friendless, homeless waif, and she kept me in a kind of paradise."

"Well, you have woke up to more practical realities of life," suggested Ralph, "and now what are you going to do next?"

But Van could not get away from the theme uppermost in his mind.

"And you are John Fairbanks' son?" he continued musingly. "And I landed against you first crack out of the box! That was queer, wasn't it? Some people would call it fate, wouldn't they? It's luck, anyhow--for you sure, for me maybe. The letter didn't tell you anything, though. Now what should I do? Say, Fairbanks, let me think a little, will you?"

Ralph nodded a ready acquiescence, and Van sat evidently going over the situation in his mind. As he looked up in an undecided way, Ralph said:

"I don't see any great occasion for secrecy or reflection. You were sent to deliver a letter?"

"Yes, that's so."

"To my father. My father is dead. We open the letter, as we have a right to do. It satisfies us that the writer knows considerable that might vitally affect our

interests. Very well, it seems to me that your duty is to take me, the representative of John Fairbanks, straight to the person who wrote that letter."

"Yes," said Van, "that looks all clear and nice enough to you, but I don't know how he might take it."

"You mean the writer of the letter?"

"Of course."

"Whose name is Farwell Gibson."

"I didn't say so," declared Van evasively.

"But I know it, don't I? Have you any reason for concealing his identity?"

"Yes, sir, I have," declared Van flatly.

"Why?"

"I can't tell you that. See here, Fairbanks, you guess what you like, but until I have reported the result of my mission to--to him, I have no right to say another word."

"All right," assented Ralph. "It will all come out clear in the end, only before we drop the subject I would like to make another guess."

"What is it?" challenged Van.

"That man in the long linen duster in the one-horse gig was Farwell Gibson."

CHAPTER XXIX--A RIVAL RAILROAD

There was some mystery about Farwell Gibson, Ralph decided, and the more he scanned what he knew of his past, his peculiar method of sending the letter to his father, and Van's guarded manner, the more he was satisfied that there was a puzzle of some kind to solve.

The sun was going down and night was coming on apace. Ralph propounded a pertinent query.

"What is your next move, Van?"

"I don't mind telling you--to get after that one-horse gig."

"It's home by this time, probably."

"I intend to follow it."

"I think I had better go with you, Van," suggested Ralph.

"Why not? You don't think I am anxious to shake the best friend I ever had, do you? There's just this, though: Mr. Gibson is a kind of a hermit."

"And does not like strange society? I see. Well, I shall not intrude upon him until you have paved the way. Let me keep with you. When you get near his home go on ahead and report just how matters stand. If he cares to see me, I shall be glad. If he don't, there's an end to it."

"That's satisfactory," assented Van heartily. "I guess he will be willing to see you."

"I hope so, Van."

"And if he does, I know you will be glad he did," declared Van convincedly.

"Do you intend to start for his place to-night?" inquired Ralph.

"I think we might. I feel fresh as a lark, and it's a beautiful night. If we get tired we can stop for a rest, and cover the journey by daybreak."

"By daybreak?" repeated Ralph. "Why, it's an easy four hours' jaunt."

"Is it?" smiled Van. "I guess not."

"Only twenty miles?"

"Yes, but such twenty miles! Why, it's a jungle half the distance."

"Isn't there a road?"

"Not a sign of one. The gig will make it on the cut-around, and that means a good forty miles."

"I see. Very well, Van, I am at your orders," announced Ralph.

He thought it best to secure some more provisions. They went into the village this time, and at a little store secured what eatables they fancied they might need.

The first mile or two of their journey was very fine traveling, for they kept for that distance to the regularly-traversed road the gig had taken.

Then Van, who seemed to know his bearings, directed a course directly into the timber.

"I don't see any particular fault to be found with this," remarked Ralph, after they had gone a couple of miles.

"Oh, this is easy," rejoined Van. "You see, the Great Northern started in right here to make a survey years ago. That's why there's quite a road for a bit. Wait till you come to where they threw up the job. I say, Fairbanks, that's where they missed it."

"Who? what? where?"

"The Great Northern. If they had surveyed right through and made Dover the terminal, they could have still put through what is now the main line, and this route would have kept the Midland Central out of the field."

"You seem pretty well-posted on railroad tactics," said Ralph.

"I am--around these diggings. I've been in the railroad line for two years."

"You a railroader!"

"I call myself one."

"You have worked on a railroad?"

"Sure--for two years."

"What railroad?"

Van regarded Ralph quizzically.

"Tell you, Fairbanks," he said, "that's straight, although the railroad hasn't a name yet, hasn't turned a wheel, is so far only two miles long, and that's all grading and no rails."

"Well, you present a truly remarkable proposition," observed Ralph.

"Isn't it? It's a reality, all the same. And it's the key to a situation worth hundreds of thousands."

"You mystify me," acknowledged Ralph,--"allowing you are in earnest."

"Absolutely in earnest. No joshing. I'm quite interested, too, for I'm one of the two men who have built the railroad so far."

"Who is the other?"

Van shook his head.

"That's a secret, for the present. I think you'll know soon, though--soon as you see Mr. Gibson."

Ralph had to be content with this. He comprehended that there was some basis to Van's railroad pretensions, and felt very curious concerning the same.

At about eleven o'clock that night Van's predictions as to the difficulties in the way of progress were fully verified.

They were apparently in the midst of an untrodden forest. The brush was jungle-like, the ground one continuous sweep of hill and dale.

It took one breathless, arduous hour to cover a mile, and their clothes and hands were scratched and torn with thorns and brambles.

"It's a little better beyond the creek," said Van. "A man could hide in a wilderness like this a good many years in a safe way, eh, Fairbanks?"

"Yes, indeed," answered Ralph, and mentally wondered if his companion was alluding to the mysterious Farwell Gibson.

They were a wearied and travel-worn pair as they lay down to rest at the first token of daybreak. It was at the edge of a level expansive sweep surmounted by a dense growth of trees.

"We're nearly there," proclaimed Van.

"How near?" interrogated Ralph.

"You see that hill?"

"Yes."

"That's our last climb."

"I'm thankful," said Ralph.

They tramped up the slope after a bit. Once over its edge Ralph, looking ahead, made out a low rambling log house. It was about half a mile away, and smoke was coming out of its chimney.

"Now then," said Van with a smile, "I reckon this is about as close as you need come, for the present--it's a great deal closer than many others have come."

"This is a very isolated spot," said Ralph.

"That's Mr. Gibson's house yonder," continued Van. "I'll go on alone, see him, report, and come back and advise you."

"That's business," said Ralph.

"Just wander around and amuse yourself," recommended Van. "You may find something to interest you."

Ralph grew tired of sitting alone and waiting for Van. As his recent companion had advised, he took a stroll. There seemed a break in the timber about one hundred feet to the left. Ralph proceeded in that direction. He paused at a ten foot avenue cut neat and clean through the woods, and stood lost in contemplation.

Far as he could see across the hill this break in the timber continued. The brush had been cleared away, the ground leveled here and there, some rudely cut ties were set in place, and the layout showed a presentable and scientifically laid put and graded roadbed.

"I wonder," said Ralph thoughtfully, "if this is a part of Van's boasted railroad? It looks all right as far as it's gone."

What Ralph scanned represented a great deal of labor, that could be discerned at a glance. He knew enough about survey work to judge that a master mind had directed this embryo railroad project.

Ralph was still inspecting the work when a shrill whistle signaled the return of Van.

"It's all right," he announced as he came up to Ralph. "I've told Mr. Gibson everything. He will see you."

"That's good," said Ralph.

He followed Van to the house in the distance. As he neared it he observed that a man stood in the doorway.

This individual was powerfully built, wore a full bushy beard, and had a keen, piercing eye.

He scanned Ralph closely as he approached, and then, standing partly aside, with a not ungraceful wave of his hand welcomed Ralph to the hospitality of his house.

"You are Mr. Gibson?" said Ralph, feeling impelled to say something.

"Yes, young man, I am that person, and this is the office of the Dover and Springfield Short Line. Come in."

CHAPTER XXX--THE RIGHT OF WAY

The peculiar announcement of Ralph's host was so grandiloquent, and his manner so lofty and important, that the young railroader smiled despite himself.

Certainly Ralph decided the Dover & Springfield Short Line had its headquarters in a particularly isolated place, and its presentation of physical resources was limited.

"I never heard of that road before," observed Ralph.

"Probably not," answered his host--"you will hear of it, though, and others, in the near future."

Ralph did not attach much importance to the prediction. He had seen at a glance that Gibson was an erratic individual, his hermit life had probably given birth to some visionary ideas, and his railroad, simmered down to the tangible, had undoubtedly little real foundation outside of his own fancies and dreams.

Ralph changed his mind somewhat, however, as he crossed the threshold of the door, for he stood in the most remarkable apartment he had ever entered.

This was a long, low room with a living space at one end, but the balance of the place had the unmistakable characteristics of a depot and railway office combined.

In fact it was the most "railroady" place Ralph had ever seen. Its walls were rude and rough, its furniture primitive and even grotesque, but everything harmonized with the idea that this was the center of an actual railroad system in operation.

There were benches as if for passengers. In one corner with a grated window was a little partitioned off space labeled "President's Office." Hanging from a strap were a lot of blank baggage checks, on the walls were all kinds of railroad timetables, and painted on a board running the entire width of the room were great glaring black letters on a white background, comprising the announcement: "Dover & Springfield Short Line Railroad."

To complete the presentment, many sheets of heavy manilla paper formed one entire end of the room, and across their surface was traced in red and black paint a zigzag railway line.

One terminal was marked "Dover," the other "Springfield." There were dots for minor stations, crosses for bridges and triangles for water tanks.

Ralph readily comprehended that this was the plan of a railroad right-of-way crossing The Barrens north and south from end to end, and the big blue square in the center was intended to indicate the headquarters where he now stood in the presence of the actual and important president of the Dover & Springfield Short Line Railroad.

Ralph must have been two full minutes taking in all this, and when he had concluded his inspection he turned to confront Gibson, whose face showed lively satisfaction over the fact that the layout had interested and visibly impressed his visitor.

"Well," he challenged in a pleased, proud way, "how does it strike you?"

"Why," said Ralph, "to tell the truth, I am somewhat astonished."

"That is quite natural," responded Gibson. "The idea of the world in general of a railroad headquarters is plate glass, mahogany desks and pompous heads of departments, looking wise and spending money. The Short Line has no capital, so we have to go in modest at the start. All the same, we have system, ideas and, what is surer and better than all that put together, we have the Right of Way."

"The Right of Way?" repeated Ralph, taking in the announcement at its full importance.

"Yes, that means what? That under the strictest legal and full state authority we have a franchise, empowering us to construct and operate a railway from Dover to Springfield, and vesting in us the sole title to a hundred-foot strip of land clear across The Barrens, with additional depot and terminal sites.

"That must be a very valuable acquisition," said Ralph.

"I am not used to talking my business to outsiders," responded Gibson, "and you are one of the very few who have ever been allowed to enter this place. I admit you for strong personal reasons, and I want to explain to you what they are."

He sat down on one of the benches and waved Ralph to the one opposite. His mobile face worked, as silently for a minute or two he seemed concentrating his ideas and choosing his words.

"I am a strange man," he said finally, "probably a crank, and certainly not a very good man, as my record goes, but circumstances made me what I am."

A twinge of bitterness came into the tones, and his eyes hardened.

"The beginning of my life," proceeded Gibson, "was honest work as a farmer--the end of it is holding on with bulldog tenacity to all there is left of the wreck of

a fortune. That's the layout here. The Short Line, no one knows it--no one cares--just yet. But no one can ever wrest it from me. Ten years ago, when the Great Northern was projected, your father saw that a road across here was a tactical move, but the investors were in a hurry to get a line through to Springfield, and dropped this route. Later the Midland Central cut into Dover. They too never guessed what a big point they might have made cutting through here to Springfield. Well, I got possession of the franchise. I had to bide my time and stay in the dark. To-day, with the Short Line completed, I would hold the key to the traffic situation of two States, could demand my own price from either railroad for it, and they would run up into the millions outbidding each other, for the road getting the Short Line completely dominates all transfer passenger and freight business north and south."

"Why, I see that," said Ralph, roused up with keen interest. "It becomes a beeline route, saving twenty or thirty miles' distance, and opens up a new territory."

"You've struck it. Now then, what I want to lead up to is Farrington--Gasper Farrington. You know him?"

"Yes, I know him," assented Ralph emphatically.

"Between my old honest life and the dregs here his figure looms up prominently," resumed Gibson. "Around him has revolved much concerning your father and myself in the past. Around him will loom up considerable concerning you and myself in the future. For this reason I take you into my confidence--to join issues, to grasp the situation and to move down on the enemy. In a word: Gasper Farrington ruined my chances in life. In another, he robbed your father."

Ralph was becoming intensely interested.

"He robbed my father, you say?"

"Yes."

"Are you sure of that, Mr. Gibson?"

"I am positive of it. I have the proofs. Even without those proofs, my unsupported word would substantiate the charge. The more so, because I helped him do it."

CHAPTER XXXI--A REMARKABLE CONFESSION

"You helped Gasper Farrington rob my father!" exclaimed Ralph.

"Yes," answered Gibson unhesitatingly.

Ralph wondered how he could make the admission thus boldly and unblushingly. Gibson, however, acted like a man who had taken a desperate stand with an important end to attain, and for the time being at least had set aside all questions of sentiment and conscience.

"It will be brief," said Gibson, after a pause. "When the Great Northern was on its first boom and everybody gone wild to invest in its bonds, I caught the fever too. My wife had died and I had no children, and converting my land into cash I came up to Stanley Junction with thirty thousand dollars in my pocket. I was always stuck on railroading. I fancied myself a director, riding in the president's car and distributing free passes to my friends. In a black moment in my life I ran afoul of Gasper Farrington. He took me under his wing and encouraged my visionary ideas. At that time your father had twenty thousand dollars in Great Northern bonds. They were not all paid for, but nearly so. They were, in fact, held by a bank as trustee in what is known as escrow--that is, subject to his call on payment of the small sum still due on them. Your father had great confidence in Farrington. So had I. I put my capital in his hands."

Gibson became so wrought up in his recital that he could not sit still. He got up and paced the floor.

"If we had kept to a straight investment, your father and I," proceeded Gibson, "we would have been all right. But Farrington dazzled us with his stock-jobbing schemes. He actually did let us into a deal where by dabbling in what is called margins we increased our pile considerably. In about a month, however, he had us where he wanted us. That is, he had our affairs so mixed up and complicated that neither of us knew just where we stood, and didn't dare to make a move without his advice. For some time we had all been dabbling in Midland

Central securities. One day, after he had got me to buy a big block of that stock, the market broke. I was a pauper."

"Had Mr. Farrington lost too?" inquired Ralph.

"He pretended that he had, but later I found that he was the very person who was manipulating the stocks on the sly, and trimming us. We had a bitter quarrel. Then he said all was fair in war and business. I was desperate, lad, about my money, and when he set up a plan to get hold of your father's bonds, I went into it. I am sorry now. I was crazy those days, I guess, money-mad!"

The man's candor vouched for his sincerity, but Ralph looked sad and disturbed.

"Anyway, he got your father in a tight corner, and I helped him do it. It was a complicated deal. I can't say that Farrington stole those bonds outright, but in a roundabout way they finally came into his possession. If the transaction was ever ripped up, I don't believe it would stand in law. But I don't know that positively. Your father lost his bonds, and I got nothing out of the transaction. But there is something else that I want to get at. A little later, never doubting Farrington's honesty, your father gave him a mortgage on his homestead. It was done to protect your mother--that is, feeling himself getting involved, your father wished to be sure that she had at least a shelter over her head. There was no consideration whatever in the deal. It was merely put temporarily in the shape of a mortgage until affairs had cleared somewhat, when it was to be deeded to a third party, and then direct to your mother."

"Then Mr. Farrington never had a right to collect that interest money," said Ralph.

"He wasn't entitled to a cent of it. Farrington then got me into another deal. I had borrowed one thousand dollars from my brother. He got me to take security for it, as he called it. In some way he had got hold of the old Short Line charter here. At that time it was treated as a joke, and considered worthless. I didn't know it. He got my thousand dollars, claimed to lose it in a deal, and I was flat broke."

"And later?" suggested Ralph, recalling in an instant what he had heard from Big Denny about Gibson.

"Well, I got hard pressed. I saw a chance to get even with him. We were in a deal together. I canceled it to get a few hundred dollars, and signed our joint names as a firm. Later I learned that I had a right only to sign my own name. I went to his house. He threatened to have me arrested for forgery the next day, showed me the forged paper, as he called it, and a warrant he had sworn out. We had a fearful row. I beat him up good and proper, smashed some windows, and, disgusted with life and mankind, fled to this wilderness."

It was a vivid recital, running like some romance. Gibson took breath, and concluded:

"A man can't sit forever eating out his heart in loneliness. I knew that Farrington would not hesitate to send me to jail. I located here. One day, yonder faithful fellow, Van Sherwin, came along. He was an orphan outcast, I took him in. His company gave a new spur to existence. I got casting up accounts. I rarely ventured to the towns, but I sent him to a relative, who loaned me a few hundred dollars. I investigated the Short Line business, even paid a lawyer to look it up. I found I had something tangible, and that for a certain date, then two months ahead, provided I did some work each day except Sunday thenceforward on the right of way, I could hold the franchise indefinitely, unimpaired. Since then, Van and I have been at the grading work, as you see."

"And why did you write to my father? inquired Ralph.

"My hard, bad nature has changed since Van came here to cheer me with his loyal companionship," said Gibson. "I always felt I had wronged your father. I wrote to him, thinking him still alive, to come and see me. Instead, you come as his representative. Very well, this is what I want to say: I am willing to make the statements in writing that I have given to you verbally. That, you may say, is of no practical benefit to you. But here is something that is: My sworn statement that the mortgage was in reality a trust will cancel everything. That means something for you, doesn't it?"

"It means a great deal--yes, indeed," assented Ralph.

"Very well," said Gibson. "You go and use the information I have given you, the threat to expose Farrington, to get him to destroy that forged note he holds against me, so that I can come out into the daylight a free man to put my railroad project on foot, and I will give to you a sworn statement that in any court of law will compel him to surrender to your mother, free and clear, your home. And I won't say right now what I will be glad to do for the widow and son of John Fairbanks, when the Short Line is an assured fact and a success."

CHAPTER XXXII--FOUND

It did not take Ralph long to figure out the merits and prospects of the proposition that Farwell Gibson had made to him.

As the latter went more into details concerning his own and Mr. Fairbanks'

dealings with Gasper Farrington, Ralph felt a certain pity for the hermit. He had been the weak, half-crazed tool of a wicked, cool headed plotter, had repented his share of the evil doings, and was bent on making what restitution he might.

The peculiar situation of affairs, Ralph's quick-witted comprehension of things, above all his kindness to Van Sherwin, had completely won Gibson's confidence.

They had many little talks together after that. They compared notes, suggested mutually plans for carrying out their campaign against the Stanley Junction magnate, legally and above board, but guarding their own interests warily, for they knew they had a wily, unscrupulous foe with whom to contend.

Gibson insisted that they could do nothing but rest that day and the next, and when the third day drifted along he took Ralph for an inspection of his enterprise.

There was not the least doubt but that Gibson had a valuable proposition and that he had legally maintained his rights in the premises.

"Every day except Sunday within the prescribed period of the charter, I have done work on the road as required by law," he announced to Ralph. "Van's affidavit will sustain me in that. Everything is in shape to present the scheme to those likely to become interested. It will be no crooked stock deal this time, though," he declared, with vehemence. "It's a dead-open-and-shut arrangement, with me as sole owner--it's a lump sum of money, or the permanent control of the road."

Van's eyes sparkled at this, and Ralph looked as if he would consider it a pretty fine thing to come in with the new line under friendly advantages, and work up, as he certainly could work up with Gibson so completely disposed to do all he could to forward his interests.

Next morning Ralph said he had other business to attend to. It was to go to Dover in pursuance with his instructions from Matthewson, the road detective of the Great Northern.

It was arranged that Van should drive him over in the gig. If Ralph made any important discoveries that required active attention, he was to remain on the scene. If not, he promised to return to "headquarters" on his way back to Stanley Junction.

Ralph reached Dover about noon, and put in four hours' time. He located Jacobs, the man to whom the stolen fittings were to have gone, he saw the local police, and he gathered up quite a few facts of possible interest to Matthewson, but none indicating the present whereabouts of Ike Slump, his tramp friend, or the load of plunder.

"Did you find out much?" Van inquired, as they started homewards about five o'clock.

"Nothing to waste time over here," replied Ralph. "I imagine the Great

Northern has seen the last of its two thousand dollars' worth of brass fittings, and Stanley Junction of Ike Slump, for a time at least."

The Gibson habitation was more accessible from this end of The Barrens than from the point at which Ralph and Van had four days previously entered it.

There was a road for some ten miles, and then one along a winding creek for half that distance. Beyond that lay the jungle.

The sun was just going down when they forded the creek. The spot was indescribably wild and lonely. Its picturesque beauty, too, interested the boys, and they were not averse to a halt in mid-stream, the horse luxuriating in a partial bath and enjoying a cool, refreshing drink.

Suddenly Ralph, who had been taking in all the lovely view about them, put a quick hand on Van's arm.

"Right away!" he said, with strange incision--"get ashore and in the shelter of the brush."

"Eh! what's wrong?" interrogated Van, but obediently urged up the horse, got to the opposite bank, and halted where the shrubbery interposed a dense screen.

"Now--what?" he demanded.

Ralph made a silencing gesture with his hand. He dropped from his seat, went back to the edge of the greenery, and peered keenly down stream.

He seemed to be watching somebody or something, and was so long at it that Van got impatient, and leaping from the wagon approached his side.

"What's up?" he asked.

Ralph did not reply. Van peered past him. Down stream about five hundred feet a human figure stood, faced away from the ford, bent at work over some kind of a frame structure partly in the water.

"You seem mightily interested!" observed Van.

"I am," answered Ralph, and his tone was quite intense. "I expect to be still more so when that fellow faces about."

"If he ever does. There--he has!" spoke Van.

Ralph drew back from his point of observation, took a quick breath, and was palpably excited.

"I was right," he said, half to himself. "There's work here."

"Say," spoke Van, impatiently and curiously, "you're keeping me on nettles. What are you talking about, anyway?"

"That fellow yonder. Do you know who he is?"

"Of course I don't."

"I do--it's Ike Slump."

CHAPTER XXXIII--IKE SLUMP'S RAFT

"You don't say so!" exclaimed Van.

"Yes," declared Ralph--"the missing Ike Slump is found. I would know him anywhere, in any guise, and at any distance, and that is he yonder."

"You don't seem to have luck or anything in finding opportunities--and people!" observed Van dryly.

"I don't know about that."

"There's the boy the railroad company wants to find, isn't it?"

"Well, Ike Slump alone, a vagabond fugitive, isn't so much what they are after," explained Ralph. "They want to recover that stolen plunder, and from the general appearance of Slump I don't imagine he has much of anything visible about him except what he probably calls 'hard luck.'"

"What are you going to do?"

"Have a talk with him first, if I can."

Ralph reflected for a few moments. Then he decided on a course of action. He suggested that Van remain where he was. Lining the shore himself, Ralph kept well in the shelter of the shrubbery until he was directly opposite the spot where the object of his interest was at work.

He could not secure more than a general idea of what Ike was about unless he exposed himself to view. Ike seemed to be framing together a raft. He was very intent on his task--so much so, that when Ralph finally decided to show himself he was not aware of a visitor until Ralph stood directly at his side.

"How do you do, Slump?" spoke Ralph, as carelessly as though meeting him on the streets of Stanley Junction in an everyday recognition.

"Hi! who--smithereens! Stand back!"

Ike let out a whoop of amazement. He jumped back two feet. Then he stared at his visitor in a strained attitude, too overcome to speak coherently.

"Ralph Fairbanks!" he spluttered.

Ralph nodded pleasantly.

Ike grew more collected. He presented a wretched appearance. He was thin, hungry-looking, sullen of manner, and evidently dejected of spirit.

A sudden suspicion lit up his face as he glanced furtively into the shrubbery beyond his visitor, as though fearing other intruders. Then with his old time tricky nimbleness he described a kind of a sliding slip, and seized a short iron bar lying on the ground.

"What do you want?" he demanded, with a scowl.

"I want to have a talk with you, Ike."

"What about?"

"Your mother."

Ralph had heard back at Stanley Junction that Ike's mother had mourned her son's evil course as a judgment sent upon them because her husband sold liquor. He felt sorry for her, as Ike now shrugged his shoulders impatiently, and not a gleam of home-longing or affection followed the allusion to his mother.

"Did you come specially for that?" demanded Ike. "Because if you did, how did you know I was here?"

"I didn't--this meeting is purely accidental."

"Oh!" muttered Ike incredulously.

"I'll be plain, Slump," said Ralph, "for I see you don't welcome my company or my mission. Your father is worried to death about you, your mother is slowly pining away. If you have any manhood at all, you will go home."

"What for?" flared out Ike, savagely swinging the iron rod--"to get walloped! Worse, to get jugged! You played me a fine trick spying into Cohen's and getting the gang in a box. I ought to just kill you, I ought!"

"Well, hear what I have to say before you begin your slaughter," said Ralph quietly. "Out of sympathy for your mother, and because your father has friends among the railroad men, I think the disposition of the railroad company is to treat you with leniency in the matter of the stolen junk, if you show you are ready to do the square thing."

"They can't prove a thing against me!" shouted Ike wrathfully. "Think I don't know how affairs stand? They can't do anything with Cohen, either, unless some one peaches--and no one will."

"Don't be too sure of that," advised Ralph. "They can lock you up, and if they delve very deep, can convict you on circumstantial evidence. But I don't want to discuss that. It's plain business, and now is your time to act. Go home, give the company a chance to get back its property, and I'll guarantee they will deal lightly with you--this time."

"Put my head in the jaws of the lion?" derided Ike--"not much! Say, Ralph Fairbanks, what do you take me for? And what do I know about their stolen

plunder?"

"You drove off from Stanley Junction that night with it."

"Prove it!"

"You and your tramp friend. I was at Dover to-day. Your tramp friend sold those two horses belonging to Cohen twenty miles further on, I learned."

"Drat him!" snarled Ike viciously.

"You wasn't with him. Did he give you the slip, and leave you in the lurch? It looks so. I wouldn't hold the bag for anybody, if I were you, Ike Slump," rallied Ralph.

"See here, Fairbanks," gritted Ike between his set teeth, "you know too much, you do!"

"Now what, in the meantime, became of the stolen brass fittings? You know. Tell. Give the company a square deal, and take another chance to drop bad company and behave yourself."

"I won't go home," declared Ike, with knit, sullen brows. "You start on about your business, and leave me to mine."

"All right," said Ralph. "I'd be a friend to you if you would let me. By the way, what is your business, Slump? Ah, I see--building a raft?"

"What of it?"

"And what for?"

"Say!" cried Ike, brandishing the rod furiously and trying to intimidate his visitor with a furious demonstration, "what do you torment me for! Get out! I'm building a raft because I'm a persecuted, hunted being, driven like a rat into a hole. I want to float to safety past the towns, and go west. And I'm going to do it!"

"Why not walk?" suggested Ralph.

Ike flared a glance of dark suspicion at Ralph.

"And why such a big raft?" pursued Ralph smoothly--"no, you don't! Now then, since you've forced the issue, lie still."

Ike had suddenly sprung towards Ralph, swinging the iron rod. The latter was watching him, however. In a flash he had the bad boy disarmed, lying flat on the ground, and sat astride of him, pinioning his arms outspread at full length.

Ralph gave a sharp, clear whistle. Van came rushing down the bank in the distance in response.

Ike Slump raved like a madman. He threatened, he pleaded. He even took refuge in tears. All the time, Ralph Fairbanks was making up his mind. That partially built raft had roused his suspicions very keenly, had suggested a new line of action, and he determined to follow the promptings of his judgment.

"There's a piece of rope yonder," said Ralph, as Van approached on a run. "Get it, and help me tie this young man hand and foot."

They did the job promptly and well, Ike Slump raving worse than ever in

the meanwhile.

"Now then," directed Ralph, "help me carry him to the gig. Van, this is Ike Slump, of whom you have heard a little something. He is bound he won't further the ends of justice, and I am as fully determined that at least he shall not have his liberty to frustrate them. We will load him in the gig, take him to headquarters, and you are to ask our friend there as a special favor to me to keep him safely till he hears from me."

"I won't go!" yelled the squirming Ike--"I'll have your bones for this!"

"I would advise you," said Ralph to the frantic captive, "to behave yourself. You are going where you will have good treatment. Build up, and do some thinking. I shall be as friendly to you as if you hadn't tried to brain me."

"You don't mean," said the astonished Van, "that you are going to stay behind?"

"Yes," answered Ralph, with a significant glance at Ike. "I have an idea it is my clear duty to investigate why Ike Slump built that raft."

CHAPTER XXXIV--VICTORY!

In about five minutes the arrangements were completed by Ralph and Van for the transportation of their prisoner to "headquarters."

Ike Slump, tied securely, was snugly propped up in the seat beside Van. Ralph waited until he saw them safely on their way, and then went straight back to the spot where he had discovered Ike.

A cursory view of the raft had already awakened a vivid train of thought. Now, as he looked it over more particularly, Ralph found that he had grounds for suspicions of the most promising kind.

"Ike must have been at work on this for several days," decided Ralph. "I didn't think he had so much patience and constructive ability. It's big enough to carry a house, and of course his making it, as he says, to float himself down stream to a safe distance, is sheer nonsense."

Some large logs formed the basis of the raft. Over these were nailed boards to give its bottom depth and solidity.

It was a sight of those boards that had set Ralph thinking. Such handy

timber, he recognized, had no business this far from civilization. Where had they come from?

"Those two are box covers," concluded Ralph, after a close inspection, "and they are the exact size of the boxes I saw at Cohen's back room at Stanley Junction. I must find out what it does mean."

Then Ralph made a second discovery, and knew that he was distinctly on the hot trail of something of importance.

Two corners of the raft were bound with heavy brass pieces used as ornamental clamps on passenger coaches. They were stamped inside "G.N."

"Great Northern property, sure," reflected Ralph, "and of course part of the stolen plunder. That wagon load never went to or through Dover, so far as the police people have been able to find out, but I am sure it did come here, or near here, or what is Ike doing with those pieces?"

Ralph now set about tracing Ike's living quarters. They must be somewhere in the immediate vicinity.

He had little difficulty in following up a worn path across the grass. It led to a snug shakedown, under the lee of a slope roofed over with dry branches and grass.

Here Ralph found a case of canned goods, a box of crackers and a lot of tobacco and cigarette papers. On a heap of dry grass lay a wagon cushion.

Ralph circled this spot. He had to exert the ingenuity and diligence of an Indian trailer in an effort to follow the footsteps leading to and from the place in various directions. Finally he felt that his patience was about to be rewarded. For over two hundred feet the disturbed and beaten down grass showed where some object had been dragged over the ground, probably the boards used in the construction of the raft.

The trail led along the winding shore of the creek and up a continuous slope. Then abruptly it ceased, directly at the edge of a deep, verdure-choked ravine.

Ralph peered down. A gleam of red, like a wagon tongue, caught his eye. Then he made out a rounding metal rim like the tire of a wheel. He began to let himself down cautiously with the help of roots and vines. His feet finally rested on a solid box body.

An irrepressible cry of satisfaction arose from the lips of the lonely delver in the débris at the bottom of the ravine.

When Ralph clambered up again he was warm and perspiring but his eyes were bright with the influence of some stimulating discovery.

He stood still for five minutes, as if undecided just what to do, glanced at the fast-setting sun, and struck out briskly in the direction of the road leading to Dover.

It was midnight when he reached the town he had visited earlier in the same

day. Ralph went straight to the police station of the place.

For about an hour he was closeted with one of the officers there whom he had met earlier on his visit in the gig. They had a spirited confidential talk.

Ralph was on railroad business now, pure and simple, for he was acting in accordance with Road Detective Matthewson's instructions and on the strength of his written authority.

"I ran catch a Midland Central train west to Osego in about an hour," he planned, as he left the police station and walked towards the depot. "There's a ten-mile cut across country on foot to Springfield, and then I am headed for Stanley Junction by daylight."

Ralph boarded the train at Springfield at about six o'clock in the morning. His pass from Matthewson won him a comfortable seat in the chair car, and he had a sound, refreshing nap by the time the 10.15 rolled into Stanley Junction.

Griscom had this run, but Ralph did not make his presence known to his sturdy engineer friend. He left the train at a crossing near home, and was soon seated at the kitchen table doing ample justice to a meal hurriedly prepared for him by his delighted mother.

Almost her first solicitous inquiry was for Van.

"Van is well and happy, mother," Ralph Answered. "Grateful, too. And, mother, he remembers 'the dear lady who sung the sweet songs.'"

"Ralph, do you mean," exclaimed Mrs. Fairbanks tremulously--"do you mean his mind has come back to him?"

"Yes, mother."

"Oh, God be praised!" murmured the widow, the tears of joy streaming down her beaming face, lifted in humble thankfulness to heaven.

Then Ralph hurriedly went over the details and results of his trip with Van Sherwin.

Later he spent half an hour at a careful toilet, and just as the town clock announced the noon hour Ralph walked into the law office of Jerome Black.

Mr. Black was a well-known attorney of Stanley Junction. He was an austere, highly efficient man in his line, had a good general record, and all Ralph had against him was that he was Gasper Farrington's lawyer.

It was upon this account that Ralph had decided to call upon him. All the way to the attorney's office Ralph had reflected seriously over what he would say and do.

The lawyer nodded curtly to Ralph as he came into his presence. He knew the youth by sight, knew nothing against him, and because of this had granted him an audience, supposing Ralph wanted his help in securing him work, or something of that kind.

But the leading lawyer of Stanley Junction was never so astonished in his

life as now, when Ralph promptly, clearly and in a business-like manner outlined the object of his visit.

"Mr. Black," Ralph said, "I know you are the lawyer of Mr. Gasper Farrington. I also know you to have the reputation of being an exact and honorable business man. I do not know the ethics of your profession, I do not know how you will treat some information I am about to impart to you, but I feel that you will in any case treat an honest working boy, looking only for his rights, fairly and squarely."

"Why, thank you, Fairbanks," acknowledged Black, looking very much mystified at this strange preface--"but what are you driving at?"

Then Ralph told him. He did not tell him all--there was no occasion to do so. He simply said that he could produce evidence that Gasper Farrington had treated his dead father in a most dishonorable manner, and that, further, he could produce a sworn affidavit showing that the mortgage on his mother's homestead was in reality only a deed of trust.

The lawyer's brows knitted as Ralph told his story. He could not fail to be impressed at Ralph's straightforwardness. When Ralph had concluded he said briefly:

"Fairbanks, you are an earnest, truthful boy, and I respect you for it. What you tell me is my client's personal business, not mine. But I see plainly that he must adopt some action to avoid a scandal. Your grounds seem well taken, and I am pleased that you came to me instead of making public what can do you no good, and might do Mr. Farrington considerable harm. What do you want?"

"Simply two things--they are my right. After that let Mr. Farrington leave us alone, and we will not disturb him."

"What are those two things?" inquired the lawyer.

"The cancellation of the mortgage on my mother's home, and the alleged forged note upon which Mr. Farrington bases a criminal charge against one Farwell Gibson."

"Why!" exclaimed the lawyer, very much amazed. "What has Farwell Gibson got to do with this matter?"

"Mr. Black," replied Ralph, "I can not tell you that. You have my terms. Mr. Farrington is a bad man. He can make some restitution by giving me those two documents. That ends it, so far as we are concerned."

"And if he does not agree to your terms?" insinuated the lawyer.

"I shall go to some other lawyer at once, and expose him publicly," said Ralph.

Mr. Black reflected for some moments. Then he arose, took up his hat, and said:

"Remain here till I return, Fairbanks. Mr. Farrington has been sick for some

days----"

"I should think he would be!" murmured Ralph, to himself.

"But this is an important matter, and can not brook delay. I will see him at once."

Ralph had to wait nearly an hour. When the lawyer returned he closed the office door and faced his visitor seriously.

"Fairbanks," he said, "I have faith in your honor, or I would never advise my client to do as he has done. You are sure you control this matter sufficiently to prevent any further trouble being made for Mr. Farrington, or any unnecessary publicity of this affair?"

"Yes," assented Ralph pointedly--"unless I ever find out that we have any just claim to the twenty thousand dollars in railroad bonds which once belonged to my father."

"I fancy that is a dead issue," said the lawyer, with a dry smile. "Very well, there are your papers."

He handed Ralph an unsealed envelope. Ralph glanced inside.

Gasper Farrington had been forced to swallow a bitter dose of humiliation and defeat.

The inclosures were the Farwell Gibson forged note, and a deed of release which gave to Ralph's mother her homestead, free and clear.

CHAPTER XXXV--CONCLUSION

Ralph stepped across the turntable entrance to the roundhouse at Stanley Junction just as the one o'clock whistles were blowing.

It was like coming home again. Limpy, shining up a locomotive headlight, gave a croak of welcome, jumped down from the pilot, and slapped his greasy, blackened hand into that of his young favorite with genuine fervor.

The engineers, firemen and extras in the dog house called out the usual variety of cheery chaff, but all pleasant and interested.

"This is a great place to find friends!" smiled Ralph, and then hurried his steps, for the roundhouse foreman at that moment appeared at the door of his little office.

"This way, Fairbanks," he hailed, quite eagerly. "Well," as he ushered Ralph into the grimy sanctum, "back again, I see?"

"Yes, Mr. Forgan," answered Ralph, "and glad to be here."

"What news?"

"About the stolen plunder," began Ralph.

"Of course. That's the one considerable freight on my mind, just at present," acknowledged the foreman, with an anxious sigh. "We show a mortgage on our inventory, and a big railroad system don't take kindly to that sort of thing, you know."

"Very well, Mr. Forgan," said Ralph brightly, "you can change your inventory."

"What! you don't mean----"

"I have found the wagon load of brass fittings," answered Ralph. "They are in safe charge at the present time, subject to your order. Here is my report to the special agent, Mr. Matthewson, and I guess, Mr. Forgan, I'm out of a job again, for I don't see anything further in sight."

"Fairbanks, you're a trump!" shouted the delighted foreman, slapping the young railroader vigorously on the shoulder. "You've saved me some uneasiness, I can tell you! That your report?" with a glance at a neatly-directed envelope Ralph had produced. "Come with me. We want to catch Matthewson before he gets away. He's going down to Springfield this afternoon--on your business, too."

"On my business?" repeated Ralph. "That sounds like a good omen."

"Don't you worry about omens, my young friend!" chuckled the foreman. "You've about won your spurs, this time. How did you run across that stolen stuff, when those smart, experienced specials never got a sniff of it?"

"Quite by accident," replied Ralph. "I found Ike Slump. As near as I can figure it out, he and his tramp friend had a breakdown near Dover. The tramp appears to have got discouraged or frightened, cut away with Cohen's horses, sold them and decamped, leaving Ike in the lurch. Ike got the wagonload over into a ravine to hide it till he could raft the stuff to a distance, and dispose of it and disappear, too. I nipped his scheme just in time."

Matthewson appeared as glad to see Ralph as Forgan had been. He expressed the liveliest satisfaction at the contents of the report Ralph handed to him.

"I think this will be a final spoke in the wheel of Mr. Inspector Bardon," he said significantly. "Hope you attended to your writing and spelling in this report, Fairbanks?"

"Why so?" inquired Ralph.

"Because the president of the Great Northern is likely to see it before nightfall," announced Matthewson, with a grim chuckle.

The foreman and Ralph returned to the roundhouse. After a while Big Denny came in, full of animation and welcome. Ralph learned that Mrs. Slump was better, but hers was a sad household. The parents had about given up ever redeeming their scapegrace son from his evil ways, and the stricken mother insisted to her husband that they would never know good luck again until he gave up selling strong drink.

With a promise to come up to his house and see little Nora, "who so prettily says her prayers for you every night," Forgan told Ralph, the foreman allowed his friend to go home late in the afternoon.

That was a quiet, happy evening at the Fairbanks homestead.

It seemed to mother and son as though after a brave, patient struggle they had reached some sublime height, from which they could look back over all difficulties overcome, and forward to golden promises for the future.

Ralph valued the friends he had made in the railroad service and also the experience he had gained.

There had been ups and downs. There was hard work ahead. But, brighter than ever, shone the clear star of ambition at the top of the ladder of the railroad career.

Ralph felt that he was in the hands of his friends, and could afford to await their exertions in his behalf.

The next day he was returning from a stroll, turning over in his mind a plan to learn Matthewson's decision as to what, if anything, the company wanted done with Ike Slump, and to make a visit to Farwell Gibson with the joyful news that would make him a free man, when nearing home, Ralph hurried his steps at the sounds of animated conversation within the cottage.

In the cozy little parlor sat his mother, and on a stool at her feet was Van. His bright, ingenuous face was aglow with happiness, and he was chatting away to a loving, interested listener merry as a magpie.

"Hello, there, Van Sherwin!" challenged Ralph, in mock severity. "I can't have any prodigal son pushing me out of my place this way!"

"I have two boys now," said Mrs. Fairbanks, with a proud smile, as the two manly young fellows joined hands in a brotherly welcome.

"What brings you here?" was Ralph's first query.

"Slump, mainly," answered Van.

"What about him?"

"Sloped, bag and baggage--and some of Mr. Gibson's baggage to boot. He played it pretty fine on Mr. Gibson, who allowed him more liberty than he de-

served. Yes, Ike cut out last night, and we thought you ought to know about it at once."

"That's right," nodded Ralph. "However, maybe it is better he should drop out of the affair in just that way. It will save trouble and complications. He may sometime see the errors of his ways, and turn over a new leaf."

"I doubt it," dissented Van. "I think he's an all-around bad one. What about Mr. Gibson's business, if I may ask? He's terribly anxious."

"Nothing but good news," answered Ralph heartily. "Mr. Gibson is free to introduce the Dover & Springfield Short Line Railroad to the great traveling public just as soon as he likes, now."

"Bet you he'll have it running inside of a year!" predicted the exuberant Van. "Bet you in two I'm a first-class, bang-up locomotive engineer, and you're master mechanic of the road!"

"That's a far look into the future, Van," said Ralph, with an indulgent smile. "Just now, I'm getting restless for work of 'most any kind--I wish they would put me back in the roundhouse."

There was a vigorous knock at the front door of the cottage at that moment.

Mrs. Fairbanks answered the summons. She reëntered the parlor holding an envelope in one hand.

"A telegram," she announced.

"For me?" questioned Ralph, as she extended it towards him.

"For you, Ralph."

It was the first telegram Ralph Fairbanks had ever received, and, his mind on a working strain already, he looked conscious and expectant as he opened it.

The telegram was dated at Springfield, the headquarters of the road.

It was signed: "James Blake, Master Mechanic."

At a glance Ralph comprehended that the mission of his friend, Matthewson, had been successful.

"The first step up the ladder!" he said, with shining eyes, to his mother and Van.

The telegram read:

"Ralph Fairbanks will report Monday morning at the roundhouse, Stanley Junction, for duty as a regularly appointed switch towerman on the Great Northern Railroad."

THE END

*** END OF THIS PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK RALPH OF THE ROUND-HOUSE ***

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